AT THE TURNING POINT

MOD PAR

Original Maithili novel authored by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English by

Pradeep Pushpa

At the Turning Point

A Novel of Transition and Conscience

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated from the original Maithili by

Pradeep Pushpa

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An English translation of the Maithili novel Mod Par by Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated into English by Shri Pradeep Pushpa

At the Turning Point is the English translation of the Maithili novel Mod Par by Jagdish Prasad Mandal, rendered with care and sensitivity by Shri Pradeep Pushpa. Set during the historical juncture marking the end of British colonial rule, the novel captures a society suspended between entrenched traditions and emerging uncertainties. The village of Palarpur becomes a vivid setting where caste, labour, migration, belief, and education intersect in the fabric of everyday life.

Rather than centering solely on political events, the narrative explores how sweeping historical changes penetrate the intimate spheres of family and individual experience. Characters such as Devan and Kamesar represent a generation driven to leave their village in pursuit of livelihood, dignity, and self-discovery. Migration to Calcutta, physical labour, and shared hardships become the vehicles through which a new consciousness begins to take shape.

Mandal's prose is reflective and grounded, attuned to rituals, oral traditions, and the moral cadence of rural Mithila. The novel refrains from offering resolution; instead, it portrays transition as an ongoing process shaped by work, endurance, and human connection. This translation preserves that ethical depth and cultural nuance, making At the Turning Point a vital contribution to world literature exploring social transformation, labour, and the subtle evolution of everyday lives.

Published by: Pallavi Prakashan
Tulsi Bhawan, Nehru Marg, Ward no. 06, Nirmali, District- Supaul, Bihar: 847452

First Edition: 2026
ISBN: 978-93-48865-17-5
Price: 299/-
Copyright: © Publisher

Printed by: Manav Art (Pallavi Prakashan)
Typography: Dr. Umesh Mandal, umeshberma@gmail.com
Cover Design: Mrs. Poonam Mandal, Nirmali, Supaul, Bihar- 847452

Website: http://pallavipublication.blogspot.com
E-mail: pallavi.publication.nirmali@gmail.com
Mobile: +91 99316 54742, +91 62006 35563
Font source: https://fonts.google.com

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Dedication

To those who stand at life's crossroads,
carrying inherited burdens down unfamiliar roads.

To hands shaped by labour,
and to minds slowly learning to choose their own direction

And to every life lived between what was given
and what must still be created.

- Pradeep Pushpa

Foreword

☰

Literature acquires particular depth at moments of transition. During such turning points, societies pause, reassess inherited beliefs, and quietly reshape their futures. At the Turning Point, the English translation of the Maithili novel Mod Par by Sri Jagdish Prasad Mandal, stands as a sensitive portrayal of one such historical and moral threshold. The novel captures a society in motion, not through dramatic proclamation but through attentive observation of everyday life. Its strength lies in its balance. It neither exaggerates crisis nor understates change. Instead, it invites readers to witness transformation as it unfolds within ordinary human experience.

Set in the closing phase of colonial rule in India, the novel does not foreground political spectacle. No grand assemblies or rhetorical speeches dominate its pages. The author chooses a quieter path and turns to the village of Palarpur, a rural community shaped by labour, caste structures, religious practices, seasonal rhythms, and emerging aspirations. Here, history arrives not as an announcement but as a presence. It reaches the courtyard before the public square. Mandal demonstrates how national change is absorbed within domestic spaces, influencing decisions about livelihood, migration, education, and social relationships.

One of the novel's distinguishing qualities is its restraint. The narrative voice remains composed and reflective. The village is neither romanticized nor condemned. It is presented as a lived environment, layered with dignity, limitation, habit, and possibility. The characters move within tangible constraints. They till fields,

negotiate debts, observe rituals, confront doubt, and respond to shifting circumstances. They question inherited patterns while remaining tied to them. Through this measured portrayal, transition appears not as rupture but as gradual reorientation. Change emerges through effort and reflection rather than sudden revolt.

The recurring image of young men leaving their village to seek work in distant cities embodies this reorientation. Migration emerges as more than an economic compulsion; it becomes a site of learning. The outward journey prompts inward reconsideration. Exposure to new environments reshapes self-understanding and alters perceptions of home. Mandal presents this movement without sentimentality. He frames departure neither as heroic escape nor as tragic loss. Instead, he depicts it as a complex process in which dignity is negotiated through labour, endurance, and growing awareness. The dignity of work remains central. Hardship does not erase identity; it refines it.

Sri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's contribution to modern Maithili literature is defined by discipline and ethical clarity. His prose arises from lived reality. He observes closely and writes with economy. He avoids embellishment. In Mod Par, individual stories intertwine with broader social currents, creating a textured portrait of a region in transition. The narrative remains rooted in Mithila's cultural landscape while engaging wider human questions: How does one preserve self-respect amid constraint? How does a community adapt without losing coherence? How does history reshape aspiration without erasing memory? These questions extend beyond geography.

At this stage, it is important to consider the role of translation itself. Translation is not a mechanical substitution but an act of interpretation, mediation, and responsibility. When a literary work moves from one language to another, it carries more than vocabulary. It carries worldview, rhythm, cultural memory, and ethical nuance. A translator must attend to silence as much as to speech. The translator must preserve tone while ensuring intelligibility. Without translation, regional literatures often remain

confined within linguistic boundaries. Through careful translation, they enter wider conversations. For example, the global recognition of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry was shaped significantly by translation. Similarly, the circulation of Premchand's fiction beyond Hindi-speaking regions depended on sensitive renderings into other languages. In world literature, works such as Gabriel García Márquez's novels reached international readers through translations that respected both style and cultural context. These examples remind us that translation extends the life of literature. It allows voices rooted in specific soils to resonate across continents.

The present English translation by Shri Pradeep Pushpa merits thoughtful appreciation in this context. He approaches the text with humility and attentiveness. His task is not merely to convert Maithili sentences into English structures, but to preserve the cadence of rural speech and the moral steadiness of the original narrative. He retains simplicity without sacrificing depth. Cultural references are conveyed clearly while maintaining authenticity. The prose flows naturally, free from unnecessary ornamentation. The translation respects silence and pacing, two essential elements of Mandal's storytelling.

This work thus performs a dual function. It introduces an important Maithili novel to English readers while strengthening the bridge between regional and national literary spaces. In a multilingual country such as India, literary vitality depends on such exchanges. Each language carries its own idiom of experience. When these idioms converse through translation, collective understanding deepens. Efforts of this kind ensure that regional creativity receives the recognition it merits beyond its immediate linguistic community.

At the Turning Point invites readers to contemplate change not as spectacle but as lived process. It encourages reflection on responsibility, resilience, and the quiet strength that sustains ordinary lives. The novel's power lies in its composure; its significance lies in its ethical awareness. Through this translation, its voice moves beyond linguistic boundaries while retaining its

rootedness. I am confident that readers will discover in these pages not only the story of a particular village at a specific historical moment, but also a meditation on human adaptation in times of transition.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh
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Preface

At the Turning Point is the English translation of the Maithili novel 'Mod par' by Jagdish Prasad Mandal. The novel situates human life at a moment of historical, social, and moral transition. Set during the final phase of British colonial rule in India, a period often described in terms of political milestones, legislative reforms, and nationalist fervour, Mandal's narrative takes a different path. Rather than examining the transfer of power at the state level, it explores how the gradual erosion of colonial structures affected the everyday lives of people far removed from centers of authority.

For these individuals, history does not arrive as a proclamation but as a disturbance that is quiet, persistent, and deeply personal.

At the heart of this narrative lies the village of Palarpur. It is not an isolated hamlet or an exceptional settlement. Instead, it represents countless villages across Mithila, shaped by labour, ritual, caste hierarchies, and seasonal rhythms. Palarpur is portrayed as a space of both continuity and tension, where inherited ways of life endure even as population growth, economic hardship, and migration begin to unsettle long-standing balances. In this way, the village itself stands at a turning point, much like the individuals who inhabit it.

The novel unfolds through a series of padavs, each marking a shift in consciousness rather than a specific plot event. These padavs trace a movement from lives shaped primarily by inheritance and tradition to those increasingly influenced by choice, experience,

and self-awareness. This transition is neither sudden nor celebratory. Change occurs slowly, unevenly, and is often accompanied by a sense of loss.

Jagdish Prasad Mandal’s literary work arises from a sustained attentiveness to social life rather than from ideological assertion. Writing primarily in Maithili and rooted in the lived realities of rural and semi-urban Mithila, he has developed an extensive body of work encompassing novels, short stories, plays, essays, and children’s literature. Since beginning his creative journey in the early years of the twenty-first century, Mandal has published over 130 works within a relatively short span of time.

His narratives rarely depend on dramatic resolutions or rhetorical flourishes. Instead, they derive their strength from patience, accumulation, and moral consistency. Themes such as labour, kinship, caste, migration, and generational responsibility recur throughout his writing, not as abstract concepts but as tangible aspects of everyday experience.

His prose remains attuned to spoken rhythms, shaped by oral tradition and reflective pauses, allowing silence and endurance to carry meaning. Mod Par holds a significant place in this literary trajectory. It embodies Mandal’s sustained engagement with transition, responsibility, and the quiet negotiations through which ordinary lives respond to historical change.

The opening movement establishes the social foundation from which all subsequent developments arise. Life in Palarpur is shaped by deeply entrenched systems of caste, occupation, and belief. Rituals surrounding birth, worship, and daily conduct are not merely symbolic; they define belonging and determine social position. The figure of the midwife, who inscribes destiny at birth, serves as a powerful emblem of this worldview. Fate appears to be written in advance, its contours shaped by family status and social role. Yet even within this rigid structure, the novel introduces ambiguity. The repeated emphasis on destiny is accompanied by a parallel awareness of effort, endurance, and practical intelligence. Although life is often described as predetermined, it is lived through

constant negotiation and adaptation.

Labour appears early as the central organizing principle of life. It is not described as ennobling, nor is it romanticized. It is necessary, unrelenting, and physically taxing. At the same time, labour brings structure, dignity, and a sense of continuity. Men and women accept work not as a path to aspiration but as a condition of existence. Within this acceptance lies the first subtle tension. Labour sustains life, but it offers little room for advancement. This quiet tension prepares the ground for movement.

As the narrative unfolds, questioning begins to surface. It does not arise through open resistance, but through comparison and exposure. Characters such as Devan and Kushesar become pivotal at this point. Kushesar, who has already traveled to Calcutta and returned, represents an alternative path. He is not portrayed as a heroic figure, nor does he claim superiority. His significance lies in the breadth of his experience. Through him, the possibility of life beyond the village becomes imaginable. Devan's curiosity is not stirred by ideology but by proximity. He observes, listens, and gradually begins to perceive the limits of his own world.

Migration enters the narrative as a response to necessity rather than desire. The pressure of limited land, growing population, and insufficient employment compels movement. Calcutta is presented not solely as a promise or a threat, but as an inevitability. What is crucial here is that migration is portrayed as a continuation of labour, not a departure from it. The nature of work changes, but not its intensity. The body remains central. The migrant carries the village with him through language, habit, memory, and moral expectation.

The shift to urban labour deepens the novel's exploration of endurance. In the city, work becomes anonymous and fragmented. The individual is absorbed into systems that disregard lineage and local standing. The godown, the market, and the street replace the field and the household courtyard. Yet within this anonymity, new forms of association emerge. Migrants from Mithila form temporary communities based not on caste hierarchy but on shared hardship.

The city erodes certain inherited distinctions while introducing new forms of vulnerability.

Throughout this phase, Mandal's prose remains restrained. There is no rhetoric of exploitation or dramatic confrontation. Instead, the novel focuses on repetition: the lifting of loads, the counting of wages, the search for shelter and food. Through repetition, perception begins to shift. The labourer comes to recognise his own capacity not in abstract terms, but through survival. Work, once merely endured, begins to be understood. This understanding, even if limited, signals a significant shift in consciousness.

The narrative then returns to the village, focusing on the emotional and ethical consequences of separation. The experiences of those who remain behind, especially mothers, reveal another dimension of transition. Jalesari's concern is not expressed in political or economic terms. Her fear revolves around nourishment, safety, and distance. This maternal perspective grounds the novel in lived emotion. Fathers, by contrast, tend to frame departure in terms of duty and necessity. A quiet but lasting tension exists between these perspectives.

Family relationships are reshaped by migration. Sons gain earning power, while parents become dependent. Authority shifts subtly, often without acknowledgment. The novel presents these changes without judgment, allowing them to emerge through gesture, silence, and internal reflection. Belief systems also begin to adapt. Rituals continue and faith persists, yet experience introduces doubt into previously unquestioned assumptions. Destiny no longer appears entirely fixed when effort begins to produce tangible results.

As the narrative expands its focus, social institutions come under scrutiny. Religious figures, local leaders, and communal practices are shown to operate within long-standing patterns that no longer align fully with lived realities. Gurus and gosains still command respect, but their guidance often fails to address material hardship. Trust, both within families and across social groups,

begins to erode. The village remains physically intact, though its social cohesion weakens.

This stage of the novel is marked by multiplicity. Differences in belief, practice, and interpretation begin to multiply. Mandal avoids framing this solely as a story of decline. Fragmentation exists alongside interdependence. The village continues to function, even as its moral certainties begin to blur. The reader is encouraged to observe rather than judge, to recognise complexity rather than seek definitive resolution.

Gradually, the narrative shifts to a more reflective register. Devan's journey, both physical and inward, moves toward a point where motion takes on meaning. This is not portrayed as achievement or escape, but as recognition. Devan begins to understand his position within larger structures. Although fear remains, it loosens its grip. Labour becomes not just a means of survival, but a space for learning.

The novel's concluding movement does not provide closure. Instead, it articulates an ethical stance grounded in balance. Life, Mandal suggests, unfolds not at the extremes but at the centre, where multiple directions coexist. To stand at the centre is to acknowledge inheritance without being confined by it, and to accept change without surrendering discernment. This middle path requires patience, effort, and an awareness of consequence.

Translating 'Mod par' demanded sensitivity to more than vocabulary. The original text carries a rhythm shaped by oral tradition and reflective narration. Its sentences often pause, return, and unfold gradually. Preserving this cadence in English required restraint. Wherever possible, I have resisted simplification and avoided explanatory intrusion. Cultural practices and social terms have been rendered with care, allowing context to convey meaning.

This translation seeks to honour the novel's moral seriousness. At the Turning Point is not a story of dramatic transformation. It is a record of lives shaped by labour, migration, and gradual awakening. Its power lies in its attention to the

ordinary, to those whose struggles rarely appear in official histories. By bringing this work into English, I hope to extend its reach while preserving its depth, offering readers an encounter with a world where change arrives quietly and endurance itself becomes a form of wisdom. Regards-

- Pradeep Pushpa

Madhubani,
10 February 2026

Translator's Acknowledgements

Translating At the Turning Point has been, for me, not merely a linguistic exercise but an inward journey through history, memory, and moral reflection. When I first approached the original Maithili text of Mod Par, I did so out of a sense of responsibility rather than ambition. The novel does not speak loudly; it unfolds gradually through labour, silence, and the measured rhythms of village life. To carry that cadence into English required patience, restraint, and trust in the quiet strength of the original voice.

Before all else, I wish to record my deep gratitude to Dr. Ram Ashish Singh, whose gracious consent to write the Foreword has lent this volume intellectual depth and critical distinction. His reading situates the novel within a broader historical and ethical framework, illuminating its engagement with transition, labour, and conscience. That he undertook this task despite his many academic commitments is a generosity I deeply value. His words serve not merely as an introduction but as a guiding light for readers entering the world of Palarpur.

My reverence and heartfelt thanks are due to the original author, Sri Jagdish Prasad Mandal, an eminent and indefatigable writer whose creative discipline has profoundly enriched modern Maithili literature. That he deemed me worthy to translate this significant work into English is an honour I accept with humility. His trust placed upon me a solemn obligation: to preserve not only the narrative meaning but also its tonal integrity, cultural nuance, and moral texture. His prose springs from lived experience; it carries the soil of Mithila within it. I have tried, as faithfully as possible, to ensure that while the language has changed, the pulse of that soil remains intact.

I am equally indebted to Sri Krishna Mohan Jha, retired English teacher of B.D.A. High School, Nanour. His thoughtful suggestions, reflective conversations, and patient reading of selected passages helped me refine several interpretative choices. His long engagement with English language and literature deepened my understanding of idiom, balance, and tonal clarity.

My sincere thanks are extended to Prof. Qumar Hussain, Head of the Department of English, L.J. College, Nanour. His academic insights and encouragement strengthened my confidence during the later stages of revision. His perspective as a scholar of English literature enabled me to view the translation not merely as a linguistic conversion but as a work entering a broader literary conversation.

I gratefully acknowledge Sri Arun Kumar Jha, former teacher of Alpura, whose words of encouragement sustained me during moments of hesitation. Translation often requires solitude, yet reassurance from thoughtful readers restores clarity and steadiness.

My appreciation also goes to Dr. Umesh Mandal of the Department of Maithili, SNSRKS College, Saharsa, for his continued support of Maithili literary scholarship and for fostering an environment in which such cross-linguistic engagement is encouraged. His dedication to the preservation and critical study of Maithili literature creates the wider space within which translations like this acquire meaning.

I also express my sincere thanks to Shri Rameshwar Prasad Mandal, whose goodwill and moral support accompanied this work quietly yet consistently. Encouragement offered without expectation often carries the greatest strength.

Translation is, at its heart, an act of listening. It demands attentiveness not only to words but to silences; not only to events but to the pauses between them. In rendering this novel into English, I sought to avoid unnecessary ornamentation or explanation. The world of Palarpur does not require embellishment; it requires attentiveness. Wherever possible, I have allowed context

to convey culture and cadence to suggest emotion.

If this English version enables new readers to encounter the ethical seriousness and human dignity embedded in Sri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's narrative, the effort will have found its justification. Any shortcomings that remain are entirely mine.

With gratitude and humility, I place this translation before readers, hoping it may carry forward the quiet strength with which it was first written.

- Pradeep Pushpa

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It was a time when British rule was drawing to a close. Just as the transfer of power brings a shift in governance, a similar state of transition had begun to shape the lives of the people and the fabric of society. On one hand, the end of foreign rule and the arrival of self-governance filled the public with immense enthusiasm; on the other, the authority of village society, long tied to the mechanisms of colonial administration, was beginning to loosen and fade. Whether it was devotion to the nation or to society, this was perhaps the most fervent and emotionally charged moment in India's history up to that point. The imagination of the people knew no bounds. It is within this atmosphere that Kamesar stands.

The identity of Mithila's villages, regardless of state or region, remains distinctly its own. Among India's rural landscapes, Mithila stands apart not only for its dense population but also for the intensity of its labour and social engagement. This is Mithila, a place where the art of performing the same task in multiple ways, known as lūrī, has existed since time immemorial and continues even today. This tradition has remained Mithila's enduring intellectual legacy, a heritage that refines action alongside thought and moves forward steadily with time.

As things stand, Palarpur is one such village situated in the heart of Mithila. It lies at a junction formed by three parganas. The western hamlet of Palarpur, according to land records, falls within the Pachhbariyā pargana, while the eastern hamlet–though

unquestionably part of Palarpur–shares its work and livelihood patterns with the Palarpure area but is administratively part of the Pubariyā pargana. Between these parganas, certain social practices and ways of thinking appear outwardly similar, yet subtle distinctions have emerged. The fields and landless margins of Pachhbariyā are more extensive than those of the neighbouring pargana. Similarly, cultivators in Pubariyā pay land revenue eight annas per kattha more than those in the other pargana. All this is true; yet it would be incorrect to claim that Palarpur lacks an identity of its own.

In some respects, Palarpur is ahead of many villages–more forward-looking and progressive–while in other ways, it is undeniably behind. Vocationally, that is, in terms of the daily workings of life within a caste-divided society, Palarpur faces a unique disadvantage: the caste groups traditionally engaged in field labour are relatively few, whereas those linked to non-agricultural occupations are far more numerous. As a result, more than half of the village land is occupied by mango orchards, groves of toddy palm and date palm. The remainder includes homestead gardens, patches of scrubland surrounding homes, and only limited tracts of cultivated fields. That is simply the way things are.

People here enjoy a fair degree of freedom: they may plant mango trees in their orchards, raise groves of toddy or date palm, or even grow teak and sal. Such ideas are not absent in Palarpur; they are very much present. Just as toddy palms are planted in orderly rows, date palms are planted with the same deliberation. What they lack, however, is not the skill of jaggery-making found in Pachhbariyā. Even so, it would be wrong to suggest that Palarpur lacks knowledge of this craft altogether. They grow sugarcane, keep boiling pans and hearths, produce their own jaggery, and even make slabs of raw sugar in tin moulds.

Before the country gained independence, poverty compelled the people of Mithilanchal to travel for work as far as Dhaka in Bengal, and onward to Assam and Morang. The men left to earn a living, while the women stayed behind to manage the household. In

this way–through farming, livestock rearing, child care, and daily labour–families had long sustained themselves through their own inner strength and resilience.

Just as Palarpur lagged behind in economic terms, with its economy based on agriculture, it was ahead of the surrounding areas in matters of education, and remains so even today. The village's so-called middle castes–middle not economically but in terms of social and caste hierarchy–included Devan's family. It was in this family that Kamesar was born, in the year 1946.

In today's world, most families spend the chhathiyār–the sixth-day ritual after a child's birth–in hospitals, leaving little room for naming ceremonies, the writing of destiny by the midwife, or communal feasting. But this was not the case for Kamesar. Both traditions were observed. On the sixth day, the midwife and the mother sat together, Kamesar was formally named, his destiny was inscribed, and, as the saying goes, even if there was no betel leaf, at least the stem was served, meaning that a proper feast, however modest, was indeed held.

Just as a nation contains many institutions, each functioning within the limits of its own domain, society too holds the institution of the midwife, whose authority operates within its own unwritten boundaries and rituals. Within that sphere, the midwife records destiny according to her own codes. On the night of the chhathiyār, when the midwife sits beside the mother to inscribe the fate of a six-day-old child newly arrived in the world, that fate is written in proportion to the family's standing in society. As the family, so the line of destiny.

Whether a child is born into an educated and established household or into one wealthy in money and assets, the pen required to write such a destiny is of a different kind altogether from the pen used for a foolish or economically deprived family. People put it plainly- "Your fate has been written with a thick pen, how will you ever understand small matters?" And those whose fate is said to have been written with a thin pen respond in kind- "As for me, it is as if coarse lines have been scratched across my forehead." In truth,

all this is just talk, sayings exchanged and repeated.

When the midwives sat together to write Kamesar's fate, they were not women who had ever seen the inside of a royal household or a merchant's mansion. There was no reason, then, for thoughts of political power, factories, or machines to enter their minds. Devan belonged to the class of earth-bound labourers–matiyā mazdoors–those who carry loads in warehouses and offices, lifting sacks of grain and goods, moving them from one storehouse to another, from one place to the next. By the age of twenty-five, Devan had already been working for five years as a manual labourer in a government warehouse in Calcutta.

As for Devan himself, he was simply what he was. Yet in the impartial court of the midwives, Kamesar was born no differently from Rama or Krishna, sons of Dasharath and Nanda. Even so, the midwives held a firm belief about life: destiny could only be written in accordance with the family into which one was born. On this, there was no disagreement among them. An intelligent chilakaur, a capable caregiver, would serve the child with her own good sense. Just as a child who cannot be breastfed–for whatever reason–is raised and nurtured by a wise caregiver and brought onto the stage of the world no differently from the children of the well-off, so too must care rise above circumstance.

Among the group of midwives, a consensus had long existed: this was a human child, and therefore must grow and flourish as a human being and, like a living tree, one day give life to the next generation. By common agreement, they wrote that the child should receive a complete life, one lasting sixteen annas, a full measure of being.

When their thoughts shifted from life itself to livelihood, opinions briefly diverged. Some believed that a burden-bearing fate should be written; others felt that even if a person survived by begging, the fixed rules and rituals of destiny would quietly dissolve. Life, after all, carries both colours. After much back and forth, they returned to a shared conclusion: whatever skill and wit a person possesses, with that alone they will shape their life and build

their world.

That, then, was the fate inscribed for Kamesar on the night of his chhathiyār.

Palarpur is a village rich in diversity, yet it also shares the same underlying uniformity found in all village societies. This is clearly seen: when a fire breaks out anywhere, the village community–setting aside its market-bound routines–rushes to the spot, even though in everyday life, people living in adjoining rooms of the same house, villagers and townsfolk alike, may go months without meeting one another. And this is not just a matter of village or town. Even within families–among brothers, and between parents and children–a way of life has emerged in which months pass without meaningful conversation. Each person is absorbed in their own occupation, shaping their own survival, and from this arises an inevitable distance of thought. Yet when disaster strikes–fire or ruin–everyone becomes one.

Like other villages, Palarpur too has private thresholds and personal shrines attached to individual households. At the same time, it possesses shared sacred spaces: temples and a mosque, along with places dedicated to Thakurwari, Gahbar, Dina-Bhadri, and Salhes. Just as worship takes a dual form–religious devotion within individual families–it also exists in a public, social form. Many deities are universally accepted within the community, while others, associated with specific castes, hold particular significance. It would be wrong to say that offerings made to caste-associated deities lack social validity. These deities, like the more widely revered ones, also receive vows and offerings according to personal belief. The fruits of such devotion–whatever they may be–are believed to reach each individual in their own way.

What is formed at the personal level as a darbarja is, in social terms, the outward face of an individual household, a family made public. A family home, an āshrāmī dwelling, may receive visitors like any other house, but that alone does not make it a darbarja. The darbarja is, in essence, the home of society. Once an outsider, even an unknown traveller, crosses its threshold, the household assumes

full responsibility, from offering food and drink to providing rest. Beyond that, it becomes a place for counsel, discussion, and even refuge in matters of life and death. This is the darbarja of Mithila, a space where tears are sent away with a smile, a space that carries honour and dignity.

Lakshminath Gosain, too, established many such darbarjas across different villages, but the orientation and conduct of his were of a different kind. His darbarja always faced the pond in front of it, a pond excavated through collective effort for the benefit of the entire community. He renamed the darbarja a kutti or sthan, places where discourses on the fundamental elements of life were delivered, and where essential values were cultivated among companions and listeners alike. Through this, he sought to uphold the dignity of human life above the entanglements of caste and lineage.

Over the course of his life, Lakshminath Gosain lived through more than twenty floods, events known in Mithilanchal as raudīs, often remembered as times of famine. Having witnessed and endured them firsthand, he deeply understood the importance of water in human life. To spread this understanding, he not only spoke about the need to build ponds but also undertook their construction himself.

As for education, Palarpur has only one institution: a Sanskrit school. There are no other general schools within the village itself. Palarpur, Sonbarsa, Navnagar, Dhankarhi, and several other villages together form the Sonbarsa panchayat. Schooling up to the middle level is provided at the panchayat centre. At the Sanskrit school in Palarpur, children from certain prominent castes of the village, along with students from neighbouring villages, pursue their studies. Children from Kamesar's caste do not attend the village school.

Yet the Sanskrit school offers more than instruction alone. Along with a sound education, students receive meals, books, and notebooks directly from the institution. Most significantly, teachers and students eat in the same dining space and sleep on the same

bedding. To say that this is not a family would be untrue. Teachers from nearby areas commute daily from their homes, while those from farther away live with the students, sharing their daily lives.

This, too, is part of a broader process of transition. A life shaped deliberately and consistently over twenty-four hours–day and night–does not emerge by accident. Whatever it becomes, the people of Palarpur learn it by living it.

In Palarpur, as in the surrounding villages, certain practices display uniformity, while others reveal striking diversity. Alongside this, another process is always at work: just as things break apart, they also come together. This cycle of breaking and joining brings movement, and at times, produces stillness as well. Like other villages, Palarpur exhibits both sameness and variation in rituals such as marriages, bridal departures, and the shaving of a son's head.

Similarly, some social practices found in other communities and villages are present in Palarpur, just as customs from Palarpur are seen elsewhere. Yet the matter does not end there. Even within the village, behavioural patterns differ: the customary ways of one caste are not the same as those of another. And even within a single caste, distinctions persist according to economic standing and social capacity. It is this very inequality that forms the underlying code of society, allowing it to endure and move forward into the future.

In Mithila, social conventions rarely exist in a single, fixed form. A single task or practice may follow multiple paths, bending and branching as it goes. In one place, the ritual of sāye āṭh is observed; elsewhere, it is sōjhe āṭh. A sacrificial rite or act of worship may take many forms. From this arises the saying: when devotion is complete, even if there is no betel leaf–whose proper place comes after a meal–the ritual can still be fulfilled with nothing more than the stem.

In marriage ceremonies, it is clearly evident that where a wedding rite is brought to full completion by a single person's barāt, the presence of hundreds of guests elsewhere does not

necessarily guarantee that same sense of wholeness. Nor would it be correct to say that Palarpur lacks the noise and pomp of wedding processions, those, too, exist here. Just as one may see, in one place, a father guarding his honour while making no real effort to render his son truly capable, so too it is not uncommon to find honour squandered without restraint. Honour here takes many forms, each shaped by circumstance; there is no need to unravel them all now.

What matters at present is this: trust is steadily eroding, trust of everyone in everyone else. Just as a son loses faith in his father, so too does a father, the giver of life, lose faith in his son. Beyond this, difference multiplies on its own. Why is trust withdrawing from within us? And yet, it would be wrong to say that such trust can never be restored.

As in other villages, Palarpur too sees the arrival of many kinds of gurus and gosains, each practising their own form of guidance. At the same time, it would be untrue to claim that the village lacks an internal trade in gurudom. Whether in the name of caste and religion or in the name of action and ritual, forests of gurus have spread far and wide. The first lessons of guidance that a child receives from parents gradually expand, from family to society, and onward to the nation and the wider world.

And so, even within a single society, one person will say- “Eating fish is good for the body,” while another insists- “Eating fish is a sin.” One will argue- “Eating too much is harmful,” another counters- “Eating too little is harmful,” while yet another declares- “Eating less is beneficial.” Such mouth-to-mouth disputes, such tangled quarrels and confusions, exist in Palarpur just as they do in other villages.

Singheshwar Das, Mandhan Das, Krittidhar Das, and Raghu Das–four men in total–remain constantly engaged, day and night, in upholding the banners of their respective sects. Each has his own following, his own sphere of influence. Each tills and claims his own territory, practices his own form of mahantship, and actively promotes his chosen path. Yet the history of their authority–their claim to spiritual weight–does not shine in society with the same

radiance seen in certain other villages.

The first of these mahants, Singheshwar Das, possesses qualities of a peculiar kind. After his marriage rites were completed, a sense of renunciation toward his wife awakened within him. Acting on it immediately, he went straight to his father-in-law and asked him to arrange a second marriage for his daughter, declaring that he himself would remain seated in renunciation. In his own presence, he placed his wife beside another man and continued thereafter in the life of a mahant. In the early days, he would still return to his ancestral village for a month or two each year. But over time, his renunciation grew so heavy that now he returns only once in ten years, and even then, for just a single day. It would be inaccurate to say that such mahants, those who have married three times over, or who have even borne beatings at the hands of the police, do not exist. They do.

As in other villages, Palarpur too observes the Ashtayam and continuous kirtan once a year at the shrine of Mahavirji. At the Mahadev shrine, the festivals of Nawaha and Shivratri are celebrated regularly. At the Durga shrine, the autumnal Navratra is observed, while at the Thakurwari, swings are set up from the eleventh day of the bright fortnight of Sawan until the full moon. Just as the village is composed of many castes, so too, from household to household, from family to family, worship of many different deities continues in diverse forms.

From this arise differences, some subtle, some visible. Two distinctions, in particular, stand out clearly. The first lies in the special affection each deity is believed to have for particular flowers and fruits. Even so, there is also a custom that, despite such preferences, offerings of mixed or seven-coloured flowers and fruits are made, and worship is performed all the same. Yet however many the variations may be, the people of the entire village continue to live together as a single, undivided society.

Just as Ashtayam, kirtan, and ritual worship take place in the village, so too do the followers of the Kabir tradition–the nirgun path–observe chauko-pān and communal bhandāras, both privately

and collectively. The Ramaut sect also organises bhandāras and continuous recitations of the Ram-dhun. Alongside these, the shrines of Dina-Bhadri (known locally as Dadaji) host gatherings at the gahbar, as does the shrine of Salhes, while at the place of Dharmaraj, a yearly festival of bhagait-bhagtāi is observed. All of these are social events, participated in collectively.

What is clear, however, is this: every family in Palarpur is connected, in one way or another, to some sect, tradition, or caste. To say, therefore, that society here lacks uniformity would be incorrect, and yet difference exists as well. Just as caste-based practices of food and devotion operate at a personal level, they also function socially. Even if the feast following a shraddha is considered a caste-bound ritual meant for ancestral redemption, it is not true that such a gathering is excluded from society as a whole; it is included, in its own way.

Just as boundary lines are drawn between sects and paths, so too do distinctions appear across ritual conduct, social life, and the domains of art, skill, literature, and culture. In Palarpur, there are four platforms dedicated to dance and drama. There are also kirtaniya groups and chhakarvāji ensembles, though these are not full stages so much as smaller performing grounds. In other words, where there are dancers, there are musicians as well. In kirtan, along with the singers, there are players of the tabla or dhol, and performers on cymbals and majira. In chhakarvāji too, musicians and cymbal players accompany the performance, without them, it cannot proceed. What is absent, however, is a formal theatrical troupe.

Here, many shades of caste sentiment merge with the artistry of many performers, their skills blending into one another as the performance unfolds. In a Ramleela troupe, dozens of actors take on their respective roles: one becomes Rama, another Ravana, each embodying the drama of life through performance. This is not the case with Rasleela or Kadamleela. Just as the learned move toward absorption in brahmananda, so too do devotees move toward premananda. Whatever the form, each follows the pull of their own

inner inclination.

All this, for now, concerns only the village of Palarpur.

Just as in other villages there are many paths by which an individual becomes part of society, and society, in turn, shapes the individual, so too do such paths exist in Palarpur. In every sphere of life, these routes are constantly being traced, routes along which the transition from one state to another never truly ceases.

At this moment, discussion centres on the race for independence, the struggle to free oneself from British rule. There is little talk either of a distant past or of the immediate present, the present that lies seventy-odd years after independence. Just as the soil of Mithilanchal has remained fertile through the ages, population growth has continued unabated. As a result, poverty among the poor has only deepened over time. People of this region would form groups, ten, twenty, sometimes twenty-five or fifty, and travel together in search of livelihoods, journeying from the eastern regions of Nepal to Assam and Bengal, taking up work connected to agrarian life.

The people of Palarpur did the same. Year after year, for nearly six months–from the transplantation of paddy to its harvest–they travelled to rural areas in search of work. Calcutta had not yet taken on the overwhelming form of a modern metropolis, but factories, industries, and commercial enterprises were already in motion. When village labourers and agricultural workers began going to Calcutta, the nature of their work changed. They became rickshaw-pullers, cart-drivers, and bearers of heavy loads, unskilled labourers with neither fixed working hours nor fixed wages. Wherever work was available, there wages were earned; the task determined the pay.

Until a short while earlier, when the freedom movement was unfolding across the country, it had not yet taken firm hold in rural areas in the form it would assume after 1942. It is that earlier period which is under discussion here.

From nearby villages–and later, in larger groups from the

surrounding region–people began travelling to Calcutta as well, assembling in groups of ten, twenty, even fifty. From Palarpur itself, five or seven men would go each year, working as earth-bound labourers in Calcutta for eight or nine months at a stretch. During the monsoon season, work would sometimes decline; when that happened, they returned to the village and rejoined agricultural labour.

In Bengal, rainfall is abundant, not merely in one or two years, but every year without exception. The monsoon that forms over the Bay of Bengal brings rains in accordance with its force, and it is that same rhythm which governs the rains in our own region as well.

By the age of eighteen, Devan had already learned many aspects of agricultural life. The lives of farmers in this region followed a familiar rhythm: when the rains arrived, paddy transplantation began; and in the month of Aghan, when the crop ripened and the grain matured, harvesting took place. Just as population density is high in our region, so too are the villages themselves densely packed, leaving limited fertile land.

These days, much is said about Central Mithila. In Central Mithila, population density is as high as that of the villages themselves, a pattern not seen elsewhere. In the eastern and northern parts of Mithilanchal, by contrast, the population is more sparse, and villages are spread farther apart. Even today, this remains clearly visible: where there is a village every few kos in the outer regions, in the central belt one finds four or five villages crowded within the space of a single kos.

Until now, Devan had not become the kind of field labourer who could work with independent skill. By independent skill is meant a labourer who possesses complete knowledge of a task, one who understands its methods and techniques and can carry the work through on his own strength from beginning to end. When skill enters a person’s hands, they begin to recognise the bitter and the sweet of that work, the right and the wrong of it. Work, too, has its own character. There are tasks in which labour yields more than

effort alone would suggest, and others where, despite great exertion, the return remains meagre.

Devan did not yet grasp this. He understood only this much: to continue forward as his father and grandfather had done before him. He had not yet learned that one must become dynamic with the dynamic, must reshape oneself alongside changing conditions. He was beginning, slowly, to form some sense of his own work. And yet, even so, this much was already happening: just as other labourers received wages, Devan too was paid.

There is one more point worth noting. By the age of twelve or thirteen, Devan had already begun accompanying his father to work, having come to understand the circumstances of both himself and his family. In Dhanushdharī's mind, too, there lived a hard truth: when there is no land of one's own, Devan would have to live the same life that was already theirs. And so, only if Devan acquired the skills his father had learned would he, like him, be able to sustain a life with the hope of steady earnings.

Village and society alike are bound by many kinds of work: from farming and the cultivation of food grains, to orchards and trees, to straw and thatch, livestock and goods, to the building of houses and courtyards. Because of this, some kind of work is always available throughout the year, but not for everyone, and not all the time.

In our region–Mithilanchal–the ravages of floods and famine are not new; they have existed since time immemorial. Their root causes lie in the monsoon that rises from the Bay of Bengal and in the northern mountain ranges. From the icy reaches of the Himalayas flow glacial waters, spreading into a vast network of large and small rivers. It is a story long heard and understood: after twelve years of famine, in the Treta Yuga, when King Janak of Mithila himself took the plough in hand, the famine came to an end, and he was blessed with a daughter like Sita, the mother of the world.

Such is life. Only when one takes upon oneself the burden of

both body and mind can one, like Janak the yogi-king, place one hand in the fire-pit and the other upon the breast of love.

Observing Devan at work, Dhanushdhari's trust in him had grown so strong that he came to believe that even if his son continued on the same path, the family would never face hunger or destitution. Here, the discussion turns to the father. In today's world, family life increasingly breaks away from earlier generations, as new values and patterns are adopted by the next. Yet whenever parents, in their healthy years, find their needs met satisfactorily by their sons and daughters-in-law, their trust in them deepens. Gradually, those children become figures of reverence, etched into the parents' hearts.

At the age of twenty, Devan met his maternal cousin, Kushesar. Kushesar had been living in Calcutta for three years. Until then, the world Devan knew was suddenly transformed–like the moon appearing in a pitch-dark night–by this meeting. As Kushesar spoke of his earlier life, of the days before he went to Calcutta, and then turned to his present life, a sentence slipped from his mouth, almost unbidden- "When the body must be scrubbed and put to work, then no matter how many colours the world may show, for the one who must walk through it, the road remains the same."

Devan did not fully understand what Kushesar meant, yet something within him stirred. The life of his elder cousin, seen up close, awakened a quiet excitement in his heart. He asked- "Brother, if you work all day, how much do you earn?"

At this point, Devan was still a man wholly of the village, someone who understood neither measures of weight nor the distinctions between leading and lagging kinds of work. But seeing the vitality of Kushesar's body and his clothing, Devan's mind wavered at once. Such wavering, too, takes two forms: one arises from looking at others outside one's family, the other from looking at those close within it. What Devan felt on seeing Kushesar was of the latter kind.

Had there been a greater difference in age, the feeling might

have taken a different shape. But being close in age, and bound by brotherhood, attraction arose naturally, and so it did, for Devan.

Holding on to the memory of his life before it changed, Kushesar said- "Brother, we are almost the same age. The difference between us is no more than a year. So don't let it enter your mind that some spirit has possessed Kushesar, or that I've turned into something extraordinary. When I lived in the village, I earned daily wages just as you do now. But ever since I went to Calcutta and began working there, the household has found stability, and so has my own mind. Before that, need pressed in on us from all sides–on the family, and on the body itself–like the constant crush of daily hunger."

Like Devan, Kushesar was uneducated. Yet once he went to Calcutta, he saw that in every respect the city was ahead of the village. Whenever something backward begins to move forward, everything connected to it advances as well. This does not mean that Calcutta was always so different, not before the years sixteen or thirty-one. In those times, our ancestors lived there just as theirs did.

Kushesar's father had died six years earlier, and the weight of the family had fallen upon him. That experience–of bearing full responsibility–was something Devan had not yet known. His own father, Dhanushdhari, was still alive, and so the burden of the household had not yet passed to him. Because of this difference, Kushesar spoke with the authority of lived experience.

When Kushesar mentioned the constant pressure of need, Devan did not fully grasp what he meant. He simply said- "Brother, I will go to Calcutta too. I will stay with you."

Kushesar replied- "There is no harm in going with me. When you must scrub your body and put it to work somewhere, it's best to stay where the returns are fuller, where, like a sparrow's crop, the belly fills more easily. But how can you go without first taking your parents' counsel?"

Devan asked- "How much will it cost to go?"

"There's no question of cost," Kushesar said. "If you don't

have it, I'll give it right away, and once you earn, you can pay it back. But if I take you without your parents' consent, I alone will be at fault. People will say, 'That fellow misled Devan, took him away, and pocketed whatever he earned.'"

From what he understood, Kushesar was speaking from the perspective of the life that lay ahead. Devan, however, could not yet grasp this. Nor had the thought fully awakened in him of who his parents were, what their views were, or what their lives meant. And so, brushing aside Kushesar's caution, Devan said again- "Brother, when you set out for Calcutta, let me know. I will go too."

Seeing Devan's stubborn insistence, Kushesar replied- "Son, if you don't ask your father, then I will. But how can I take you without proper thought?"

"I will tell him myself," Devan answered. "Why should you say anything?"

Hearing this, Kushesar's mind softened a little. He felt it would be better if the matter were discussed directly between the two fathers.

Fifteen days later, as Kushesar began preparing to leave for Calcutta, a thought occurred to him: it would be good to visit Devan's house two days early and have a face-to-face conversation between both fathers. Another thought followed close behind, that having chosen a life of honest labour, what need was there for stealth or crooked ways? Work itself bears witness to one's life and one's time.

Until then, Kushesar had felt the need for a companion on the journey to Calcutta. Now he realised that the same train from Samastipur would carry him directly to Howrah or Sealdah station. Samastipur, after all, lay well within their own district.

On the very day Kushesar was seriously considering his departure for Calcutta, a message arrived from his in-laws' home, asking him to visit his mother-in-law. Living in Calcutta had taught him a central truth: that work stands above everything else in life. And yet, here was a call from his wife's family, and from his

mother-in-law at that. How could he refuse?

So he quietly decided this for himself: if his Calcutta-bound companion went ahead, let him go. He could travel alone if needed. And if Devan joined him, he would have a companion anyway. In truth, what was the real need for a travel companion beyond someone to talk to on the train and someone to keep watch over bags and bundles when stepping out, so that no thief could run off with them? Neither of these tasks was beyond human ability. When one is a human being, with a mouth to speak, if one cannot even exchange a few words with the person sitting nearby, then what is the point, were we born only to carry dung back to the village?

Having thought it through, Kushesar set the matter aside for the moment. His plan to go to Calcutta now hung suspended, as if on a hook. First, he would go to his in-laws' home; after returning, he would visit Devan's house. Depending on how things unfolded there, he would decide the right time to leave for Calcutta.

At the appointed time, Kushesar's companions set off for Calcutta. Kushesar stayed behind, occupied with responsibilities at home. Yet not even a trace of doubt entered his mind that his companions would fail to reach their destination. Having lived in Calcutta for four years, he understood this clearly: life moves forward by turns, sometimes with one set of companions, sometimes with another. Is it not the same within a family? At one time, the household is run under the father's guardianship, at another under one's own, and at yet another under a son's. Each has his own limits.

Two days before leaving for Calcutta, Kushesar went to Devan's house, found his maternal uncle, and after offering his respects, said- "Uncle, the day after tomorrow I'm going to Calcutta. Devan has said he wants to come with me. What is your view?"

Hearing this, Dhanushdhari's thoughts turned both backward and forward. What had the past been, and what was the present now? He had grown accustomed to a life of simply getting by, of

passing days as they came. But the next generation would surely want something more. Placing the burden of judgment on Kushesar, Dhanushdhari said- “Son, you are no outsider. Once Devan was born as my son, he has every right to go anywhere in the world and try to better his life. But even at nineteen or twenty, if he still cannot count properly or write his own name and village, then how will he manage life beyond the village?”

Hearing this, Kushesar thought to himself that he too had once been just like that. But through association and experience, at least this much had changed, he had come to understand matters of life and death, of survival and responsibility. So he said- “Uncle, is Devan the only one like this, or isn’t the whole village full of such people? Once he goes to Calcutta, he will learn everything.” ❑

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Kushesar did not stay long at his aunt's house. After speaking with her and considering her perspective, he returned promptly to his own village. This should not suggest that his uncle, aunt, or even Devan had not asked him to stay, they all had. But the life of a working person becomes so intertwined with labour that everything else begins to fade. One simply keeps moving forward, carried by the rhythm of work.

Four or five years in Calcutta had conditioned Kushesar in this way. He had come to realize that a human being is bound by countless ties, not like cattle tethered by a rope, but through the flow of life itself: through action, duty, and thought.

Yet, this was not the moment for such reflections. For now, it was enough that Kushesar, after spending the previous day preparing himself, visiting family and community, and placing the weight of his absence upon them, was now ready to leave the village and step beyond its bounds.

Midway along the road toward Devan's house, Kushesar's gaze fell upon the place where Devan would one day live in Calcutta. As his eyes settled on it, a thought surfaced: just as a house full of grain remains composed no matter how many hungry or distressed guests appear at its door, so too did his own mind remain at peace. He felt that for those born to work, there is no scarcity of work in the world. Scarcity exists only for those who drift aimlessly, like idle men or women weighed down by

helplessness. But the one who knows himself as a doer, who recognizes his own worth, begins to recognize the worth of humanity itself.

And when one views the world through a human lens, it no longer appears as a single, unchanging color.

As one question after another arose in Kushesar's mind, answers too began to surface–through inner arguments and counterarguments–until, walking along the village road, he lost all sense of how far he had come or how much remained.

The first question concerned Devan: he was about to entrust responsibility to someone who could neither write his own name nor count to a hundred. As astonishment stirred within him, a flicker of self-reproach followed. But his mind pushed back: if even a donkey in the hills, laden with stone slabs, can fulfill its duty without constant supervision, then surely Devan–whatever his limitations–is still a human being. Were not great men like Sukhdev also born from a mother's womb? Devan is, after all, human too. Those he meets along the way will teach him- "This is such-and-such; that task is done there." With name and purpose given hand in hand, Devan too will grow, perhaps even rise to something like a god.

Kushesar's mind settled on this thought. He felt that just as Devan was ready to scrub his body clean and put it to work, he could be shaped into a labourer like Kabir Baba, a man who weighs the world without rod or scale. At the thought of Kabir Baba, Kushesar's heart brightened.

Immediately, a second question arose: what kind of work should Devan be assigned? For now, he was a complete novice, green through and through. Yet work was abundant.

Some pulled hand-rickshaws with sheer bodily effort. Even those who had never lived in Calcutta knew that the three-wheeled cycle rickshaws common in their own region were different from what existed there. Just as their area had horse carts and tongas drawn by animals, in Calcutta, there were rickshaws pulled by

human beings, dragged forward by force of muscle alone.

Some went door to door, carrying water in tin containers slung from shoulder-poles, climbing again and again up to three-storey buildings. Others worked in shops and markets; some laboured in private warehouses, others in government godowns, lifting and hauling heavy sacks. There were even those employed in factories–from Hind Motors to the Eveready Battery plant–doing everything from stoking furnaces and cleaning chimneys to maintaining office accounts. And there were some who, through borrowing and lending, ran small businesses of their own.

That was the range of work that stretched across Kushesar's mind as he walked on, lost in thought.

In Calcutta, work appears in countless colors and forms. It is not like buying mangoes or vegetables, where one can taste first and judge the quality. People from their region took up all sorts of work. If possible, Kushesar thought, he would first explain the nature of the job to Devan. If Devan accepted it willingly, then the very next day, he would take him along and place him in the role.

In the beginning, as with everyone, there would be a period of adjustment, some added effort, some added expense. Devan would be no exception.

Kushesar's own work–manual labour at the government grain godown–was, by village standards, somewhat unfamiliar. In the village, heavy loads were typically carried on the head or across the shoulders. Bundles of paddy or stacks of firewood were borne on the head; logs, bamboo, and similar materials were carried on the shoulder. But at the grain godown, the sacks had to be lifted onto the back and carried that way.

As his thoughts turned and returned, Kushesar found himself reflecting on his own beginnings. Had he not once stood exactly where Devan stood now? If his own body held strength, did Devan's not hold the same? Why, then, should Devan not be able to work?

Once Kushesar fixed his gaze firmly on Devan's potential for

labour, his thoughts began to race, like a cart gathering speed as it rolled downhill. He realized this: wages at the godown were not paid by the hour. They were paid by the sack, by the load, by how much one could carry from place to place. Once Devan saw the potential for higher earnings, his interest would naturally follow. Until now, Devan's life had been shaped by the constraints of a low-income household, where sustaining a family meant dealing with hundreds, even thousands, of tightly knotted threads, each one difficult to loosen or break.

As Kushesar wandered in thought, a feeling rose within him, like the sudden joy of stumbling upon something unexpectedly useful in the middle of a wild thicket. His mind settled. Devan, after all, was human. Just as a person can climb mountains and break stones, so too can he rise even from waterlogged seas.

Between mountain and ocean, Kushesar's thoughts swelled with a new resolve, fresh as a newly turned mound of earth- "If I am ready, then I must make Devan ready as well."

Kushesar's thoughts moved further ahead. Once the direction of work was settled, what remained were the arrangements for food and shelter. As his mind turned to matters of eating and living, a thought arose: Calcutta stands on artifice–on craft and contrivance–and one must grasp its mechanisms to practice one's own skill. Just as, in familiar surroundings, one works when conditions are favorable and rests when they are not, Devan too would need to learn this rhythm. Not through direct instruction, perhaps, but by being brought into it, so that, by working alongside others, he would gradually adapt on his own.

But all of this could only happen if Devan remained close to the work itself. Every form of labour carries its own discipline and conduct. For now, it would be enough to draw Devan toward the idea of work, to say to him- "Son, when we came together from the village to Calcutta, your uncle entrusted me fully with your care. In the same way, I must now carry both your burden and mine. You have youth on your side, and strength in your limbs, just as I do. Then why shouldn't the two of us do the same kind of work, side by

side?”

There was at least this much assurance in godown labour: the manager was cooperative, and there was no shortage of work. Payment wasn’t strictly by count alone, whatever grain spilled from torn or split sacks was not wasted for people like them. This meant that, in time, the arrangements for food would naturally fall into place.

When a life raised in scarcity finds a practical means of satisfying hunger, only then does the hope of standing upright begin to stir within it. Hope, after all, is what sustains life, what sets the cradle of existence swinging, step by step, on the branches of tomorrow.

As these thoughts wandered through Kushesar’s mind, another question surfaced: until a person awakens to being their own master, how can they become disciplined? And until life is disciplined, how can one grasp the principles of living? Until those principles are understood and internalized, how can one act ethically? And until one becomes ethical, how can one recognize the duties that arise from moral order?

These questions, layered one upon another, echoed within him as he walked on.

Kushesar’s mind settled on another reflection. The dog, a four-legged creature that has lived alongside humans since the earliest days, remains our companion even today. And yet, it has not been granted the fifth element, intellect. Even so, it maintains discipline. (Here, he did not mean stray dogs.) If such an animal can be disciplined, then surely a human being–endowed with all five elements–is capable of even greater order.

But a human being moves in two directions. One is to learn and advance by understanding a task or idea; the other is to measure the movement of life itself and seek out paths that have not yet been revealed through experience. When such questions arise, it is then that the seeker becomes an investigator of their own existence, setting out on a path of inquiry.

Kushesar's mind came to rest on this conviction: Devan, who had chosen to accompany him to Calcutta out of curiosity about life itself, would, in time, become a true traveler on life's path, moving forward step by step.

When human beings begin to walk together, like a well-matched pair of bullocks yoked to the plough, even a life worn down by defeat begins to bloom green once again. Kushesar's faith blossomed. And as it did, his gaze returned to the rhythm of life. Watching that movement, he came to understand: food is the very foundation that sustains life.

As Kushesar's thoughts turned to food, Devan's meals came to mind. He accepted, in his own understanding, that Calcutta is Calcutta, it is neither Mumbai nor Delhi. Of course, like those other metropolises, Calcutta is a great city. But the ease and affordability of food found here is unmatched by the others. If the time spent cooking for oneself is instead dedicated to work, then income increases alongside food intake. The cheapness and accessibility of food in Calcutta is something Mumbai and Delhi simply do not offer.

Another thought arose: just as Kushesar took his daily meals at roadside eateries and small shops, he would guide Devan to do the same. Or rather, once they began working together, Devan would learn naturally, just as an untrained bullock, yoked beside an experienced one, gradually begins to plough with steady rhythm. Just as Kushesar had raised himself and his family to a modest but livable threshold through the labour of his own hands and feet, so too would Devan, one day, lift both himself and his family to the same level.

Returning to the matter of food–specifically Devan's meals–Kushesar felt it wise to shape his habits after his own daily routine: lunch eaten at stalls and roadside shops, and dinner cooked communally in one of the ten shared lodgings. There, they would sit, cook, and eat together. And if their group of ten became eleven, so be it.

Once the burden of food was crossed–once the boat of life reached the far shore–Kushesar's thoughts turned to shelter.

As he considered lodging, he reflected that while some paid rent, others lived in makeshift huts and shanties. Neither option suited their means. But since the Darbhanga Dharamshala existed in the Big Bazaar area, Devan would, in one way or another, find accommodation there. What mattered most was protection from rain and cold. Just as shade is essential in the heat of summer, so too are shelter and warmth vital against rain and winter chill.

Here, the Darbhanga Dharamshala deserves special mention. The residents of the Big Bazaar neighborhood had once built this dharamshala to fulfill their dasgarda obligations, communal duties tied to rituals and gatherings. Nearly a hundred people could sit or sleep there at any given time. As long as the dharamshala remained functional–with its doors and walls intact–the community made full use of it. But since dasgarda responsibilities did not arise daily, the building often stood empty for long periods.

When migrants from Mithilanchal arrived in Calcutta and began working as manual labourers in the Big Bazaar area, they recognized an opportunity and started living in that very dharamshala. It provided not only shelter but also space for cooking, along with water and latrine facilities. Though solidly built, the structure was not made to last a century. Over time, cracks appeared, the walls weakened, and signs of deterioration set in. Gradually, the neighborhood reduced its use of the dharamshala for major functions. As the market expanded, local residents constructed second and third dharamshalas, eventually abandoning the original one altogether.

That abandoned structure came to be known as the Darbhanga Dharamshala.

Labourers from our region who worked in Big Bazaar lived there, worked from there, and spent their evenings singing bhajans and kirtans, sharing stories of their villages and homes. And more than that–year after year, like a faint echo of the Saurath Sabha–the

dharamshala hosted fifty or more gatherings rooted in kinship, storytelling, and communal exchange.

By the time Kushesar reached the edge of his village, his thoughts had settled. Taking Devan to Calcutta would bring at least this much benefit: a struggling household–his own extended family, a part of himself–would gain a new direction in life.

There is work in the village, but not enough of it. And yet, if life were better organized, even work would not fall short, especially in Mithilanchal.

Mithilanchal is a land where the year divides itself clearly into three distinct seasons, each unfolding across its own cycle of months. Some fruit trees and grain crops take longer to mature; others grow quickly. Within a span of four months, countless varieties of grains, flowers, fruits, pulses, and vegetables are cultivated, yields through which households sustain themselves.

Yet, many factors disturb the balance of the seasons, tilting them toward either excess or scarcity. Too much rain brings floods; too little–or none at all–brings drought. In both cases, the rhythm of agriculture breaks down. Severe cold and frost also damage crops, repeatedly pushing rural life into crisis.

And yet, despite it all, one truth holds steady: human beings remain human. With intellect and discernment–and with their labouring hands and feet–they always find some way, anyway, to carry on. To say that there is no loss would be untrue; losses occur, again and again. But still, the villages of Mithilanchal and the people who inhabit them endure, remaining much as they have been for generations, affirming their vitality simply through their persistence.

As Kushesar's gaze shifted from Devan, it turned toward his village, his society, and the wider world. Seeing his small community as part of a much larger whole, a quiet delight stirred within him, the kind of delight that arises from recognizing that, just as a human being stands upright, so too does a village or a society: poised like the equator, balanced at the very center of the world.

Just as the equator has its north and south, its east and west, flanked by the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn, so too does life unfold through change. Half the world moves toward transformation at any given time. Change does not belong to one side alone; it moves in both directions. Where there is rise, there is also decline. This is true not only of individual lives but also of villages and societies.

In a person's life, when knowledge arrives, ignorance recedes; when fearlessness takes root, fear dissolves; when character and clarity grow, corruption and distortion fall away. In the same way, within a village or society–divided between rich and poor–when harmony increases on one side, something else necessarily diminishes on the other. Where one form is eroded, another gains strength.

Suddenly, Kushesar's attention returned to the weight of Devan's life. The moment it did, his own mind answered: a human being is never truly a burden to another. Each person carries their own weight, on their shoulders or their head. How, then, can one person be a burden to another?

Yes, this much is true: when someone fails to understand the workings of their own life–their actions, their strengths and weaknesses–they remain constrained. But the moment they recognise their capacity for action and usefulness, fear begins to loosen its grip, and the journey toward fearlessness begins. From fearlessness, courage is born.

That was all that needed to be done: to bring Devan into the living rhythms of human life so that, once he found his footing, he would continue to move forward, step by step.

When a person begins to understand their own existence–recognising their limits and boundaries, both physical and mental–they also begin to understand their place in the world. The world is round. Wherever one stands on a circle, one stands at the centre. East and west, north and south, all directions exist at once. And when one stands in the middle of the world, one must learn to walk

the middle path.

To walk the middle path means to know right from wrong, and still move forward without veering too far to either side.

By the time Kushesar reached home, his mind had settled into clarity. Devan would not be a burden. He would become a companion, someone who carried his share of the weight. All that remained was this: to bring Devan onto the path, to steady him there, and then, from behind, to gently pat his back and keep urging him forward, so that he might one day learn to run his own race in life.

When even a single person is set in motion through one's supportive service, the value of one's own life becomes visible. The worth of life is not something we manufacture at will. A sheet of paper remains just that, paper. But the moment a seal and signature are placed upon it, it becomes currency. Whether or not the world acknowledges this transformation, one's inner mind accepts it. And this inner mind is itself a fragment of the world's larger consciousness.

Collectively, there is universality; individually, there is individuality. Yet both arise from the same universal source. To recognise this is to recognise the boundary of the human mind, and to live with an awareness and respect for that boundary.

After Kushesar returned from his maternal uncle's home, Jalesari came and stood silently beside her husband. Jalesari–that is, Dhanuṣadhari's wife–had sensed that Devan would soon be going to Calcutta and would no longer remain in the village. It was not something confirmed through conversation, just a sense, a drift of unspoken words circulating in the air.

Standing beside her husband, Jalesari's thoughts became entangled in a web of sorrow and pain. She was weighed down by grief. Emotions rose within her like rain-bubbles in the monsoon month of Sāvan, forming, swelling, and bursting, sometimes from the splash of water, sometimes from the shock of her own life. Just as a cow–or any domesticated animal–cries when its calf is taken

away or wanders off, its eyes brimming with tears, so too did Jalesari's heart tremble at the thought of Devan being taken from her side.

Yet she could not bring herself to speak. Her silence came from restraint. Her husband, her son, and Kushesar–three generations–had discussed the matter together. In such a decision, she felt it would not be right for her to intervene.

Jalesari scarcely understood what life truly was, or what the world truly meant. One is born into this world, and it is within this same world that one must live out one's life. A space barely three and a half cubits wide holds billions of human beings, and that human world contains billions of colors.

Between motherhood and fatherhood lies a deep divide. A child needs food and water again and again to satisfy hunger and thirst. That comes from the mother. And the mother's mind, too, gathers the child's entire life into a single concern: nourishment. Little space remains for attention to the outer world or the broader arc of life beyond.

Like many mothers, Jalesari's mind fixated on a single fear: if Devan went to Calcutta, what would he eat? She did not understand that it was precisely for the sake of securing food that Devan would be going to Calcutta.

Seeing his wife standing silently before him, Dhanuṣadhari asked gently- "Why are you standing here, swallowing your thoughts like this?"

At that moment, Dhanuṣadhari himself was reflecting on what Devan's life would be like away from home. While Devan remained in the village, under his care, he could teach him skills, through words, through hand-guided practice, shaping craft with craft. But how would Devan learn in Calcutta?

No sooner had the doubt arisen than his own mind offered an answer. Kushesar, too, had once been just like Devan. Five years in Calcutta had changed him. He had built a fine house, arranged his sister's marriage, and brought stability to his life.

As his thoughts moved forward, Dhanuṣadhari felt a quiet surge of resolve. Devan was no longer a milk-faced child who might lose his way at every turn. He was nineteen or twenty now, a young man. And in Calcutta, wouldn't people recognize him as a Maithili speaker, introduce him to fellow Maithils from Mithila, help him find his footing? He had grown strong. There was enough strength in him now to bear not only the weight of the nation's boundaries, but the world's as well. A light life, like a flower, and a family of his own: these, too, would come in time.

Amid these thoughts, Jalesari finally spoke- "Ever since I heard that one thing, my mind has been fluttering restlessly. That's what I came to ask about."

Dhanuṣadhari asked- "What did you hear?"

Jalesari replied- "The boy will go to Calcutta."

Dhanuṣadhari responded calmly- "Yes. If his own heart is set on going to Calcutta to earn, why should I stop him? We've seen people from our own village go off to America, England–who knows where–to make a living. Compared to that, Calcutta is almost like home. Since the division of Bengal and Bihar in 1912, it may have become another province, but before that, we all lived under the same rule. That's why our speech, our ways of walking and living, even our reading and writing, still carry the same color."

Just then, Devan returned after seeing Kushesar off. The happiness in his heart at the thought of Calcutta was like the quiet joy one feels after learning a new letter for the first time. On the road, he had already absorbed many stories from Kushesar, about Calcutta, about the life that awaited him there. He had also heard that by the time of Independence in 1947, there were very few villages left whose people hadn't gone to Calcutta. Village after village, extended families and kin networks had all found their way there, becoming connected through shared labour, language, and experience.

Seeing Devan, Dhanuṣadhari eased the weight in his own heart and said- "Son, since you've decided to go, I can see the

happiness on your face, and the heaviness on your mother's. Why don't you two look at each other properly first, heart to heart?"

As her husband stepped aside, both literally and in thought, from Devan's decision to go to Calcutta, Jalesari faltered. She faltered because she was a mother, after all, but he was a father too. It was fathers like him who carried forward the family, the lineage, and its honour.

Devan's heart, meanwhile, was brimming with excitement. Drawing close to his mother, he said softly- "Ma, if I don't feel settled there, I'll come back. Why take on sorrow and worry before anything has even happened? Just think of it as if I've gone to some relative's place for five days."

He said this because he believed that, just as a cow–or any domesticated animal–cries and frets for a while after its calf is taken away, but soon adjusts and returns to the rhythm of life, his mother too would, in time, regain her balance.

Whether a son's words are light or heavy, true or false, a mother's heart weighs them on a single scale and believes them in a single color. This isn't to suggest that sons deliberately deceive their mothers. And yet, if sons truly remained faithful to their parents, then why, in today's world, do we so often see mothers and fathers cast aside like bundles of dry straw, abandoned among bushes, groves, and trees?

Between these questions lies another, deeper one: the question of change over time. As time changes, so too must thought and conduct. Even now, large parts of society remain caught in superstition. But when blind belief begins to transform into conscious faith, knowledge enters life, and with it, transformation.

Listening to the exchange–the quiet reasoning between father and son–Jalesari, who had been wavering like water stirred by the wind, gradually steadied herself.

Dhanuṣadhari asked Devan- "Son, until now, you've lived in your own village, in your own home. Now you'll be living in another village, under another man's roof. Think carefully about

how you'll settle yourself there."

Devan's mind was as blank as clean paper. Whatever he had heard from Kushesar about Calcutta had only deepened his fascination. Excitement bubbled within him as he replied- "Whatever Kushesar bhai tells me to do, and whatever he does himself, I'll watch, learn, and do the same."

Here it must be said that even now, village society carries within it a certain confusion: the belief that one should follow what a person says, but not necessarily pay attention to what that person actually does. Trapped in this half-understanding, Dhanuṣadhari cautioned- "What Kushesar tells you to do may be fine, but make sure you also watch what he does."

Devan had little patience for his father's deeper reflections; his mind was elsewhere. He answered- "When I start working, I'll do exactly what I see Kushesar bhai doing. If something feels wrong, I'll ask. And I'll keep my eyes open, watching, learning, staying alert."

Hearing Devan's words, a sense of trust awakened in Dhanuṣadhari's heart. He felt that the devotion Devan had developed toward his elder cousin–toward Kushesar–if carried forward with sincerity, would lead him toward good rather than harm.

Turning his thoughts to the future, to family, and to work, Dhanuṣadhari said- "Son, human life is such that a person can shape it. One can make it better and better, or let it slip from bad to worse. Other lives–those of beings unlike humans–do not possess this power. That is why, among countless forms of life, the human life is the highest."

But Devan neither listened carefully nor fully grasped his father's thoughts. The excitement of going to Calcutta had completely consumed his mind, it spun like a whirling top. He replied- "Father, there's no work in the village, but over there, there's so much work that anyone who wants to work can find it. If Kushesar bhai achieved so much in just five years of earning, why

would I do any less? Had I gone three or four years earlier, I'd be like him by now. Just like he spent on his sister's wedding, I would have bought land."

At the word land, a thought stirred in Dhanuṣadhari's mind: if one could secure a home and fields–establish the means to live–and then shape one's life independently while moving in step with the times, would that not be the truest form of freedom in an independent country?

Yes, this was what human life truly longed for.

Dhanuṣadhari said- "Kushesar mentioned catching the train the day after tomorrow. You should go to his place tomorrow evening."

Devan felt like leaving at once, eager to spend the next two days soaking in stories of the road and of Calcutta itself. But before going anywhere, he knew there were social obligations to fulfill, customary rites and timings that had to be observed. He said- "Kushesar bhai said the same, that I should come tomorrow evening, so the two brothers can leave together from home." ❑

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Hearing his father's words, a feeling rose in Devan's heart, something akin to the joy one feels when glimpsing the promise of an independent life. To live by one's own earnings, that, he felt, was the true labour of life. Caring for one's parents and children stood above all else, for human beings are shaped by and trained for family life.

To speak of service is easy; to describe it, easier still. But when service reveals itself in its vast, demanding form, it inevitably sends a tremor through the mind. Even that trembling comes in two forms: one is the tremor of fear, the other the tremor of responsibility. And the only answer to the tremor of responsibility is this, to serve with the full measure of one's strength.

Consider this: for generations, families have been raised under systems of servitude and subjugation; lives have been shaped within those very constraints. Within that narrow circle, life learned to move forward.

Devan recalled his father's words: until a human being gains the means to use his own hands and feet freely, his limbs twitch restlessly, like a fish out of water.

All at once, a powerful attraction toward Calcutta awakened in Devan's mind, and with it, a quiet detachment from the family he was leaving behind. Inwardly, he said to himself- "I'll show Father what Devan is capable of. When others can gain everything through

sheer labour, why shouldn't I do the same? If I'm leaving home to earn, then I'll return with earnings and show the entire village that someone like Devan lives among them."

Intellectually, Devan remained untrained and somewhat backward. Yet from the moment the idea of going to Calcutta and earning a living took root–and began to grow–his mind seemed to leap forward. It grew eager to run: impatient, restless, and charged with a new hunger for movement.

At dawn the very next day, as the sun rose over the village, Devan's heart grew light and unsteady, much like a bride's on the morning of her departure. And how could it be otherwise? He was stepping out into the world with the burden of shaping his family's future resting on his shoulders.

Jalesari, his mother, had momentarily forgotten that Devan was leaving for Calcutta that day. When she had first heard the rumor–and then the confirmation from her husband–the thought had struck her deeply. But with Devan still present before her eyes, the certainty had faded from her mind.

Had she remembered, she might have been busy from early morning preparing his meals, just as mothers do on the day a daughter leaves her parental home. But nothing of the sort happened.

At breakfast, Devan said simply- "Ma, today I'm leaving."

Hearing the word leaving from her son's mouth, Jalesari started in shock. Oh heavens! She had served him the same simple breakfast she gave him every day. Her attention didn't turn toward her own forgetfulness, it fixed itself on Devan, sitting there quietly before her- "You could have told me this earlier in the morning," she said.

Sensing his mother's emotion, Devan felt it would be wrong to answer sharply. He replied gently- "I forgot, Ma. That's why I didn't say anything."

Adopting a slightly scolding tone, Jalesari said- "How can anyone forget something like this? People call someone who forgets

like this scatterbrained."

Devan answered with a light tone- "Ma, no one is scatterbrained at home or in the courtyard. That happens in schools and colleges."

But Jalesari didn't truly hear what Devan said. Her mind had already turned inward, busy reproaching itself. He had eaten breakfast, yes, but what about dinner? What kind of mother lets her son leave without feeding him properly one last time?

Trying to make amends, she said softly- "Son, this is your home. Whatever you eat today, remember it. Remember that your mother fed you this on the day you left. May God be kind to you. Just as you're leaving this house smiling, may you live smiling wherever you go in the world."

Her blessing lingered in the air–gentle, trembling–as Devan prepared to step across the threshold.

Taking his mother's words as a blessing, Devan said nothing. He remained silent, yet, like a hungry calf turning instinctively toward its mother, he kept looking at her, his gaze full of longing, love, and unspoken emotion. Seeing her son like this, Jalesari Devi began to waver and break down.

"Son, the two of us have grown old. What certainty is there in old age? One day the eyes may stop seeing, another day the ears may stop hearing. And still, you have not yet become the bearer of this family's burden. You must understand your responsibility and, like Shravan Kumar, carry your parents to the seven sacred pilgrimages on your shoulders."

Hearing his mother's words, Devan's heart trembled. But he calmed the stirrings within him.

A trembling of the mind is of two kinds. One is useful, life-affirming. It leads to resolve and directs a person toward meaningful action. The other is futile, draining energy and wasting time in acts that leave life barren, like a field already threshed. That kind of trembling had no place in Devan's heart.

Accepting his mother's words, Devan replied- "Mother, whenever something good or bad crosses your mind, do tell me. Whatever work I'm capable of doing, I will do my best to complete it. But just as pain from illness must be endured by each person individually, suffering too must be borne. No one can truly carry another's sorrow."

Believing he had eased the weight in his heart, Devan placed his thoughts into his mother's hands. But a mother remains a mother, the one who binds a family together. She spoke again, softly yet firmly- "Son, now you are a grown man. You'll work, you'll earn, and you'll take care of this family. Only then will true confidence arise within you. Your marriage will take place, children will come, and you alone will have to carry the weight of everyone's life on your shoulders."

Jalesari spoke in the flow of the moment. Yet beneath her words lay the traditional duty long assigned to parents: the belief that once a son or daughter's household is settled through marriage, the parents consider themselves released from the burden–or debt–of their children.

Devan's mind, meanwhile, was still dancing with vivid images of Calcutta. Because of this, his heart kept opening and blooming with joy. He said- "Mother, just like Kusher Bhai earned for five years, built a brick house, and married off his sister, I too will earn and show you. I don't even have a sister to marry off, so I'll buy ten kathas of farmland instead."

Until now, in the mind of Jalesari–who had lived her life like a hired farmhand–there had been one quiet dream: that she, too, might one day own ten kathas of land. With that, the family could sustain itself on its own grain and greens, living self-sufficiently. They could rise to the dignity of a farmer's life.

Now, in the final stage of life, in old age, when Jalesari heard these words from her son, the same old faith awakened in her, the kind of faith that stirs when one sees a dream at dawn and feels compelled to rise and fulfill it. She said- "Son, if we had even that

much land–just enough to survive on greens and simple food, to keep life going–then our family, too, would gain the honour of being called a farmer's household. Our dignity would rise."

But Devan's mind was soaring so high that he barely heard his mother's words. Still, he felt the need to respond. He said- "Mother, whatever I can do with these hands and feet, I will do it honestly. I will never do anything that would make you call me dishonest. Whatever I earn, I will place in your hands."

Seeing the promise of her son's future earnings, a surge of hope rose in Jalesari's heart, like the joy of a naked person who, upon entering a cloth shop, suddenly gains the freedom to choose garments at will. Just as the swing hanging from the kadamba tree in Vrindavan belonged to Krishna–and through him, to the people of Braj–so too did Devan's hope belong to Jalesari, and hers to him. Everyone knows Krishna was not merely a cowherd, but one who shaped his life in harmony with cattle, who both offered and created the sacred nectar, sustaining his existence through that rhythm.

Laying down the burden of her heart, Jalesari said- "Son, just as your grandmother once said before she died, I tied her words into the corner of my sari and kept them in my heart. Who knows how long I'll carry them? I am a mother, after all, and once, I was a daughter too. If a harsh word ever slips from my mouth and wounds you, would that not make me a barren, ill-fated mother who brings harm to her own child?"

Hearing his mother's words, Devan felt reassured, he understood that this, too, was her way of offering consent. He said- "Mother, since you go to the riverbank and use the village paths, do everything at the right time. And after coming home, try not to lie down flat on the bed, arms and legs stretched out in exhaustion."

Without replying, Jalesari moved silently toward her work. In Devan's mind, a thought arose: Why didn't I at least say a few words to Father before leaving the house?

Meanwhile, Jalesari, having stepped away from her son, busied herself in the kitchen. Yet her mind felt as though it were

hanging from a hook, suspended and restless.

A thought stirred within her, like that of an egg seller who dreams of buying a goat with the profit from eggs, and then a cow with the gain earned by raising the goat. But such calculations did not arise in Jalesari's mind. How could they? At the final stage of life, having reached old age, she saw clearly that for all these years, both she and her husband had only so much strength in their bodies, and now, even that was slowly draining away.

There was only one son, Devan, and he too was thin and frail. How much hope could truly be placed in him?

And yet, her heart answered back: hope still remained. Whatever a person may be–good or capable–how much can someone else truly do for them? Even after death, it is one's own face that is placed before the mouth.

Looking at her own worn and deprived life, a wish quietly rose in Jalesari's heart: that Devan might at least earn enough so that, until death, neither she nor her husband would have to writhe in hunger.

Whether he builds a house, buys land, or arranges his own marriage, those things he will do for himself, for his own future. Serving one's parents also falls within the realm of duty, but its reward is not inherited by another. Until now, all the love, care, and service poured into raising Devan had been for this one hope: that for as long as his parents lived, he would not let them suffer the pain of illness or the pangs of hunger.

If that much came to pass, then it would mean that the service done for the son had borne fruit, and the reward, in full, had been received.

Seeing the promise of her hope beginning to take shape, a quiet maternal strength awakened within Jalesari. From this arose a prayerful thought, that God might grant Devan the wisdom to first learn the skill of earning before rushing into the act of earning itself. Only when the craft of work is mastered does that skill begin to guide the hands. Work is the true authority, and authority itself is

born of work.

When the capacity to earn develops, intelligence takes shape alongside it. And when that happens, a person begins to think with discernment, understanding that a son is truly a son only when he fulfils the duty of one.

In fulfilling that duty, his own conscience will remind him: when there were no means of livelihood, it was right to go in search of work. But once those means are secured, if expenditure is not guided by moral judgment, then those very earnings may be used for wrongful ends.

No matter how far one lives from home, or how often one changes location, when life begins to settle among other human lives, that place gradually becomes familiar, it begins to feel like one's native land, like a second home.

The desire to keep the mind entertained is one thing, but it cannot be said that such a desire alone constitutes right action. We often say we stand together in joy and sorrow. But how sorrow turns into joy, and who remains present in that transformation, must also be seen and understood.

Everyone knows that whoever is born must one day die. Even so, how long is a human life? What guarantee is there of time? A moment exists only within another moment.

If one turns to physical science, one finds countless layers–page after page, argument upon argument–intertwined like the tangled roots of a yam. Extracting a sound and complete understanding from it and arranging it clearly is no child's play. One might accept that beneath physical science lies a deeper layer: spiritual science, or the science of life. But this, too, does not reveal itself easily, nor all at once.

Yet even so, such happiness had risen in Jalesari's heart that she began to feel how, in the practical course of life, a woman–that is, a daughter–lives through three distinct forms of companionship. From birth until marriage, she lives with her parents. After marriage, she gains a new set of parents in the form of her in-laws,

and a companion in the form of her husband.

Of course, among countless people exist countless lives and patterns of living, but that is not the concern here. What matters here is the ordinary path of life as it is commonly lived.

A daughter's life between her parents is shaped by service and emotion. From this foundation, a certain style of parental behavior takes form. When she enters her in-laws' home, that behavior adapts and begins to move in many new directions. There are families where the daughter-in-law is embraced and understood as a daughter, and where the parents-in-law conduct themselves in a manner that allows love to grow between son and daughter-in-law, reducing conflict.

But there are also families where the son is regarded as one's own blood and seed, and treated accordingly, while the daughter-in-law is seen as an outsider–another seed altogether–and never truly accepted. From this mindset arises the most bitter, poisoned atmosphere within the household.

Indeed, there are many families in village society where parents, of their own will, break the bond between son and daughter-in-law, separating them, and in doing so, abandon all their own customs and ways for the rest of their lives. After all, each village, and each household, enacts its own drama, and every person carries the script of their own play. Each lays out the theatre of their life in their own way, like Krishna of Vrindavan forever composing the rasa dance.

As for Jalesari, she has no concern with all this.

When she sees people dying, it never occurs to her that she, too, will one day die, just like everyone else. She does not reflect on the nature of anyone's death. To her, death simply means the departure of breath. And even then, the hope of life does not awaken merely from seeing death. Instead, by observing the living, she feels: if life has been given, why think of dying?

In this way, the fear of death never truly departs from the mind, but neither does it dominate her. Looking directly at the

world before her–at her surroundings–she turns her gaze toward life itself and begins to move forward.

Thus, the hope of life continues in such a way as if death will never come. Just as everyone else lives, so too will I live. Poor Jalesari, how could she understand that death in life is not merely the departure of consciousness into emptiness? That is only one aspect of the five-element body's activity. For now, the eyes still see the world, the ears still hear, and the hands and feet still move, satisfying hunger and thirst, sustaining the effort to keep living.

Yet along with the body, a person also carries the dwelling of the soul, which has its own world of colours, meanings, and moral conduct. By grasping that truth, one begins to understand what it means to be human. Even after the eyes are closed, the world remains visible; even after the ears are shut, everything can still be heard.

But none of this concerns Jalesari. Her worry is immediate and deeply human: today, Devan is leaving home for a distant place. Where will he stay? What will he eat and drink? How will he sleep and manage his days? As these thoughts rise, her heart begins to ache with exhaustion and sorrow.

And yet, another voice stirs within her. Devan exists. However thin or frail he may be, he is still the child of her womb. If any harm were to touch his mind or body–if even a single hair on his head were to hurt–would her own heart not ache in response?

As these thoughts gather, Jalesari's mind begins to turn toward the dormant hope of Devan's future, a hope that, until now, had been quietly sleeping.

A thought arose in her heart: today's meal should be one Devan would remember for the rest of his life. When the village comes to mind, parents and kin, community and soil, follow in its wake. So today, she would feed him such food that its memory would linger forever. Not just linger, she hoped that even when Devan encountered sweets of every colour in Calcutta, he would not find the taste of Mithila's fried delicacies there. If such food existed

in Calcutta, even the people of that city would serve it to others. But true merit lies where its value is not easily understood.

Meanwhile, Devan, guided by his own thoughts, went straight to his father. Though his father's hands were occupied with work, his mind was deeply absorbed in the unfolding path of Devan’s life. Thoughts rose and collided within him, yet his habitual movements continued, precise and steady, like the rhythm of an archer drawing and releasing his bow. The actions of his body went on almost without awareness. His hands performed the daily tasks of life, but his mind trailed Devan’s future like a silent companion.

Habit, after all, remains habit. When practice becomes second nature, life itself flows in a disciplined, automatic rhythm. And when habitual actions align with time and keep moving forward, they form a dynamic life, one that advances in harmony with the motion of time.

As long as Devan had been speaking with his mother, his tone and thoughts had slowly begun to shift, flowing, almost imperceptibly, toward his father. The form his father’s affection had always taken now stirred Devan so deeply that it felt frightening. A feverish dread suddenly gripped him, like a burning illness that flares without warning. And in that moment, no thought of any kind could escape from his mouth.

Just as Devan’s mind had become locked in its own tightly wound thoughts, so too, the moment Dhanuṣdhari’s eyes fell on him, a jolt of emotion surged through his heart, as if something inside had first clenched tightly, then suddenly let go. That inward tension gave rise to a feeling of remorse. And from that remorse came a heaviness, a weight so great that his own thoughts began to frighten him.

Softened by that sorrow, his mind spoke within- “Have I still not learned the limits of my own life? I have only one son, and now even he is leaving his village and home for Calcutta. If he doesn’t go, what will he eat? How will life continue? But he’s so thin and

frail. Will he ever marry at all? While the two of us–his mother and I–are alive, we manage somehow. But when one of us is gone, how will the other endure?”

These thoughts bound Dhanuṣdhari so tightly that they spun beyond his control. He could not speak, his voice caught between what should and shouldn’t be said. And amid all this, another anxiety rose: If the people of the village see Devan as weak and slight, how will he survive in a city like Calcutta?

That city was a roaring, indifferent world, teeming with noise and traffic–where even the clever struggle to stay unharmed. And Devan–he was only Devan.

As his thoughts moved further inward, Dhanuṣdhari resolved that once Devan reached Calcutta, he must be instructed to write letters. If not every week, then at least once a fortnight, he must write back.

All at once, his attention turned toward his ancestry, and his thoughts reached the point where the earliest memories of his life began. Of the generation before his father, he had never seen them. Whatever ideas he had of them were like fragments of stories about far-off pilgrimage sites, half-heard, distant, fading. But the faces he had seen with his own eyes remained vivid. Those memories did not dissolve so easily. They lingered, stubborn and enduring, like the memory of a mother’s milk in a child’s body, lasting right up until the edge of death.

When Dhanushdhari was five years old, he used to accompany his father to the fields, while his mother went with his grandmother. He would play along the ridges as the elders worked the land. In that same life, he witnessed the deaths of both his father and grandmother. Later, he lived the same life with his own father that his father had once lived with his grandfather. Even now, he continues in that way, bound to the belly and the soil.

From this very life, Devan now wishes to change the course of the family’s journey. The need is clear. The family has kept moving, bending under the same burden for generations. If its

direction is not turned now, even continuing along the same path will soon become difficult.

Suddenly, a thought struck Dhanushdhari: Why not ask Devan everything today–talk heart to heart–and settle things according to my own understanding, my duty as a father?

What is life, after all? And how does one find release from it? Is it not simply this, that neither does the world truly belong to us, nor do we belong to the world? Just as we arrive empty-handed, so too, like Alexander, do we depart, hands empty and swinging. Then why cling so tightly to the tangled accounts of life, to attachments that can never be held forever?

Dhanushdhari asked- "Son, you're going to Calcutta?"

Devan, whose gaze had been fixed on the ground, lifted his eyes to the sky and replied- "Babu, I've already spoken with Kushesar Bhai. He's ready to take me along. So?"

Dhanushdhari asked- "And what work will you do there, on your own?"

Devan, echoing what he'd heard from Kushesar, answered- "If I've been born into this world like every other human being, then what work is there that a person cannot do with their own hands?"

From Devan's words, Dhanushdhari understood that, like a parrot repeating "Sitaram, Sitaram Radheshyam" without comprehension, Devan too was echoing Kushesar's teachings, repeating what he had been told, not what he had fully grasped. His words carried the rhythm of training, not independent thought. Yet Dhanushdhari accepted this. He accepted that Devan would indeed go to Calcutta.

He said- "Son, when you leave the village, cross its boundary at dawn and step into the boundary of another. The boundary of one's own village or family becomes the boundary of someone else's village, someone else's family."

Each detail of going to Calcutta–every practical aspect of

labour and life–began to take root in Devan's awareness. Until now, the wholeness he felt toward his family and society gathered and focused on a single point: the journey ahead.

Rising from his father's side, Devan went to his mother and said- "Ma, there's still a lot of work to do, so let me eat now. Otherwise, I'll get swept up in everything and forget to eat."

Jalesari's heart had already accepted that these final moments would soon end. Her son, who had belonged fully to the home, would soon belong to a world beyond it. This meal–this one–she could still serve him with her own hands. But the evening meal, she knew, would no longer be hers to give.

Following his own timing and rhythm, Devan took leave of the house. Just as a devotee feels tremors in hands and feet when overtaken by divine presence, Devan too felt his thoughts tremble and blur. Work and labour slipped from his mind. His thoughts drifted to the kind of life his cousin Kushesar had built, how, in five years, he had managed family responsibilities and earned enough to bring his parents ease. Devan now wished the same for his own.

As thoughts–both hopeful and anxious–raced through his mind, the road passed beneath him almost unnoticed. And when Kushesar saw him approaching, a wave of joy rose in his heart. When one finds a true companion, he thought, the whole world opens up, like a voyage with Vasco da Gama.

"You did well to come early," Kushesar said. ❑

4.

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When Kusher was leaving home, neither his mother nor his father showed the slightest trace of sorrow. Their expressions remained unchanged. The reason lay in their son's ability to earn and the income he brought in.

People often say that village families are falling apart, but few truly understand what is actually breaking and what lies beneath the surface.

Samastipur, the junction in their own district, was a well-known station and a familiar place. Because of this familiarity, no new or unusual thoughts occurred to Devan. He had yet to truly grasp the realities of a farmer’s life or the cyclical nature of agricultural work.

By observing his father day after day, he had learned to perform a few scattered farming tasks. Otherwise, had he understood the contrast between farming practices in the Madhubani region and those in the Samastipur area, he might also have understood a deeper truth.

In the villages around Samastipur, the fields remain active throughout the year. In contrast, in Devan’s own region, Madhubani, farm labourers find work only for about one and a half months during Akharh and another month during Aghan. According to the traditional calendar, only two and a half months of the year are devoted to productive agricultural labour. The remaining nine and a half months are spent in idleness at village crossroads or

passing time playing cards and chess.

Agricultural life can progress only when this two-and-a-half-month period of work expands into year-round employment. Put another way, only when farmers remain engaged in agriculture throughout all twelve months will both the cultivators and their fields come fully alive.

Geographically, this region experiences three distinct seasons: winter, summer, and the rainy season. This is not the case everywhere in the world. Some countries experience only one season, others two. There are, however, certain regions in China that also witness all three.

In the evening, when the two brothers, Kusher and Devan, boarded the Calcutta train at Samastipur station, the platform was faintly lit, but inside the carriage a dim darkness prevailed. Since their tickets had already been arranged, they had no trouble finding seats.

Before the train began to move, Kusher turned to Devan and said- "Devan, from now on, we'll eat and drink in Calcutta. If you feel like eating something now, let me know."

From the moment Devan had seen roasted corn being sold on the platform, he had been craving it. Still, he kept quiet out of self-restraint. But when he heard Kusher speak of eating, he could no longer hold back and said- "Brother, eating lightly during a train journey is better. Let's buy two corn cobs each. We can nibble one kernel at a time, slowly. That way we'll enjoy the taste, and the journey will pass pleasantly."

Hearing Devan's words, a flicker of irritation rose in Kusher's mind. The train journey would last seven or eight hours. How could two corn cobs be enough for such a long trip? And if they became thirsty, was it really reasonable to avoid drinking water? Devan was unfamiliar with the road to Calcutta, and it had already been decided that their next proper meal would be there. Perhaps Kusher also thought that just as there is only a short gap–two or three hours–between a morning snack and the midday meal,

there is a similar gap between the midday meal and the evening snack.

Another thought crossed Kusher's mind. It wasn't as though Samastipur was the only station where food was available. Other stations ahead would also have vendors. If hunger struck again, they could buy something there.

Calculating the price at one anna per cob, Kusher bought four corn cobs. He handed two to Devan and kept two for himself. Then he said- "Devan, before we know it, we'll be in Calcutta."

Hearing those words- "before we know it, we'll be in Calcutta," Devan's heart filled with hope. Just as a wave of happiness runs through an unemployed person upon hearing of a job, the same happened to Devan.

He asked- "Brother, if we reach Calcutta late at night, will we start working from tomorrow morning?"

Sensing Devan's eagerness to begin work, Kusher replied- "Yes, that can be done, but..."

Devan pressed- "But what?"

Gathering his thoughts, Kusher said- "We're still in Samastipur. The journey ahead is long. This train is made of iron and wood. If anything disrupts the route, we may be delayed. And even after we reach Calcutta, work has to be arranged. So for now, let's not dwell on tomorrow's work. If all goes well and everything stays on schedule, then yes, we can start working from tomorrow."

As the engine was coupled, the train jolted slightly and came to a halt. When it stopped, Devan asked- "Brother, why has the train stopped?"

Kusher replied- "The engine has been attached. It will remain here for a while and then move on."

Soon, the train began to move. Kusher sat down in his seat. Between the two brothers, three other passengers were seated, which brought an end to Devan's chance to continue speaking or asking questions. Kusher sat silently, lost in thought about Devan.

A clever person can sharpen their own intelligence. But when someone like Devan–thin, inexperienced, and uncertain–is taught how to live his life, that becomes the highest form of artistry, expressed through discipline and order.

Kusher's thoughts deepened. A human being is not a bird that leaps straight from the ground into the sky. One must have direction and a path. Like a palm or date tree, a person must first take root for twelve years. Only then can one rise from the earth, support a family, and shape it into a meaningful society.

As Kusher reflected on Devan's physical strength and his potential for work, his mind grew hopeful. Until Devan finds an opportunity to work, he will lack experience and judgment. But the moment he starts working, the work itself will guide him and teach him skill. When the opportunity arrives, the power of labour will awaken within him. And when this power reveals its result in the form of wages, only then will he sit at the gameboard of life–like the Kauravas and the Pandavas–and begin to make his moves.

Noticing that Kusher had moved away and was sitting silently, a restlessness stirred in Devan's heart. Just as there was darkness in the train, there was also darkness inside the compartment. A life lived in confinement, in isolation, is equally dark. When no voice of reassurance is present, that darkness deepens. In such a place, life begins to choke and wither, shrinking little by little, until it finally dies.

Yet the human mind is a strange thing. The moment it hears a thought or a question, people respond by speaking something into the darkness. It does not matter if the response is crooked, foolish, hollow, or even false.

When Krishna was identified with Dhundhakari, darkness spread in all four directions like fog. In the same way, darkness spread around Devan. What surrounded him was the realization that there would be no conversation with the unfamiliar people seated beside him.

Moreover, he had always heard in the village that trains were

full of cheats and tricksters. In earlier days, they cut pockets and stole money. Now they use mobile phones to snatch belongings. Devan accepted this and decided that, out of modesty and caution, it was better to remain silent and simply listen to the conversations of others.

Still, the mouth needs to stay active in some way, either through speaking or by eating and drinking.

Thinking of food, Devan reminded himself that even if he was alone, he could still pass the journey. One by one, slowly, he would place kernels of corn in his mouth, keep his mouth busy, and pass the time.

Even though the compartment was crowded with passengers, Devan felt like a solitary wanderer. If there had been someone familiar–someone from his village or social circle–conversation might have been possible.

People may sit still like logs of wood, but the mind is never like that. The mind moves faster than the hands of a clock. A clock takes sixty seconds to complete a minute, but the mind moves thousands of times faster.

A new thought rose in Devan's mind. Even within the idea of brotherhood, from the broader society down to the family, there are many kinds of relationships. But at this moment, only Kusher Bhai was with him, taking him to Calcutta.

Bearing all of life's burdens on one's own shoulders, a person eventually reaches a turning point, chooses a new path, gives themselves quiet encouragement, and moves forward. Only after living in a city like Calcutta does one begin to connect with others. Through conversation, a path to understanding opens. Just as thick mist or smoke is scattered when the wind rises, clearing the view for a while, even if the haze returns later, the same happened with Devan.

The train moved steadily under its own momentum. Along with the many other passengers, Devan and Kusher continued their journey. Judging by the train's speed, Kusher estimated that they

would reach Calcutta Junction around two-thirty in the night.

Calcutta is not a village or a rural place where people wait for the sun to rise before getting out of bed. That is not to say villages are not sacred. Sages and seers once lived there too. The same earth and water, the same air and rain, the same laws of nature still exist. And just as in a flower garden, where fragrant blossoms bloom alongside fruits that range from sweet to sour, it is only natural that human lives take on many different forms.

Kusher's mind remained focused on the uncertain edge of Devan's future, planning what would come after they got off the train. Around two-thirty or quarter to three, they would disembark at their station.

Calcutta is not the kind of place where work stops when darkness falls. In the villages, people still think in old ways. Everyday speech still carries sayings like- "Night is for sleeping," meaning that the day is for work, and night is for rest, as if night were simply half of the day. But Calcutta is different. There, the boundary between day and night has blurred, and along with it, the rhythm of human life has changed. Some people work night shifts in factories and sleep during the day. For them, night brings wakefulness, and the day brings rest.

It did not occur to Kusher to reflect on how the sages of Mithila had once left home and hearth to live in forests, or at times, remained within the villages themselves. Janaka was one such sage, as were Bharadwaj and others.

As the clock approached three in the morning, Kusher's thoughts began to stir. And as they stirred, a stream of colourful reflections awakened. Some people count the night as lasting until four in the morning, while others extend it until eight. But why shouldn't quarter to three be considered morning as well? After all, the sages of old used to rise at three, leaving their beds to begin the day's activities. If three marks the beginning of morning, then quarter to three, being only a small fraction short, must lie at that very threshold. When three-quarters of a task are complete, we often

consider it as good as done.

Before getting off the train at the station, they would first complete their morning routines on the platform. Only after that would they step outside. Once they arrived at a tea stall, they were certain to run into familiar faces. In Calcutta, people from their region often run tea stalls, pull rickshaws, or work in loading and unloading. Since it had been a month since they last came from the village, they would only come to know what had or hadn't happened here after exchanging words with others.

In life, if one, before going to sleep at night, reflects on the day's actions and their causes, a natural sense of fulfilment arises. And it is through this daily experience of reflection and accomplishment that the path to balance in life gradually forms.

Kusher was silently immersed in these thoughts when the train reached Jasidih station. From here, another train departs toward Deoghar. As the train came to a stop, cries of "Bol Bam, Bol Bam" echoed across the platform. The sound rose from the mingling of passengers on both sides.

Kusher understood that, in the direction the train had come from, pilgrims were arriving to visit Baba Baidyanath of Deoghar. From the eastern side, toward Calcutta, returning passengers were boarding. The shouts of "Bol Bam" were simply the uproar of that meeting, which would settle ten minutes later, once the train resumed its journey. The returning pilgrims would then sink back into thoughts of home. As the religious atmosphere faded from their minds, the responsibilities of family and daily life would return.

Devan, however, did not understand this. Being from a village, he interpreted such noise in a public space as a sign of trouble and raised an alarm. Added to this was his fear of nighttime commotion, when theft and robbery are more common. Of course, at night, people may also shout because of fire or accidents, but those situations are usually examined in the light. Startled, Devan asked- "Brother, has there been some theft or robbery? Why is there so much shouting?"

Among the three other passengers sitting nearby, one thought Devan was naive and stayed silent. The second, who was fully awake despite the hour, responded irritably- “Why are you making such a fuss during a train journey?”

The third, who was half-asleep, snapped- “Are you the only one who paid the fare, or did we pay it too?”

Innocent and unworldly as he was, Devan couldn’t fully grasp the other passengers’ remarks. Still, with Kusher Bhai present between them, he disciplined himself like a younger brother and remained silent.

To calm the situation, Kusher said- “Just as you were half-asleep, he too was half-asleep. That’s why he reacted with surprise, just as you might have. There’s no need to get upset without reason.”

It was a turning point for those headed to Deoghar, and at the same time, Devan was on his way to Calcutta in search of a livelihood. The passenger who had snapped irritably soon drifted back to sleep. Devan quietly murmured to himself- “Jai Shiv, Jai Shiv.”

Reassuring him, Kusher said- “This is just a train journey. If it were daytime, vegetable sellers would be shouting, there would be all kinds of noise, and other sounds would mix in with it. But this isn’t that. It’s night, so just pass the road quietly. Anyway, there’s another stop ahead, Bardhaman station.”

Hearing Kusher’s words, Devan felt calm again. Kusher then began to think silently about Devan and all that would need to be done once they reached Calcutta. By the time they got off the train, it would already feel like early morning. They weren’t arriving at some unfamiliar or confusing place where moving around would be difficult. Everything had been seen before, everything was familiar. They just needed to follow the process that suited their life and their work.

The world, after all, is like an ocean whose depth is difficult to measure. Nor is it necessary to measure it. Whether one says that

water itself is the ocean, or that the ocean is nothing but water, depends entirely on the state of mind.

The finest and most harmful things often switch places with one another. For instance, people commonly believe that rice is easy to digest and bread is heavier, yet gastric trouble is often more pronounced with a rice-based diet than with a bread-based one. In the end, it all depends on individual perception.

Even though ramjhimni stands like a tree, and people call it jhimni because of its length and thickness, it is, by nature, a creeper-like plant. Its stem does not need to be tied to a support to stand upright in the soil. But when we judge ramjhimni solely by its outward appearance–its length and girth–we distort its true nature.

One might ask: if ramjhimni possesses such strength that it can lend its vital force to a delicate pulse like khesari, transforming it into something swift and powerful, like a galloping horse, how could it possibly be a weak and limp creeper? It is, after all, full of substance and vitality.

All at once, Kusher felt a shift within his thoughts. With that shift came a new current of reflection.

When carrying the burden of work–specifically, the burden of Devan's work–should one not first set that burden down before turning to look in another direction? Or should one continue to stagger beneath its weight, head bowed? As long as the head remains lowered, how can one possibly look elsewhere?

Suddenly, like a reversed count, like saying "ninety-nine" instead of "one hundred", Kusher turned his attention to the weight of his own burdens.

Devan had work to do, daily tasks that must be carried out without fail. I work every day too, and Devan will be doing the same work. Just as my family is sustained by the fruit of labour–a daily wage of fifteen rupees–so too will Devan's life begin to move forward. If Devan performs even this much work, will he not earn the same fifteen rupees?

Just as the arrival of employment brings relief to a nation

bound by servitude, so too does work bring stability to a person's life. I am not one of those hollow preachers, like an empty conch shell, constantly delivering sermons and promises of virtue–this much merit here, that much gain there–ultimately offering nothing. To live on this earth, one must remain grounded. Life cannot be lived like a bird, forever flying in the sky, sleeping mid-air, and resting while airborne.

All at once, Kusher's mind cooled, as if touched by cold water, soothing its inner heat. As this heat subsided, his gaze turned again toward Devan's life. A sudden thought arose within him: a person who can carry their own burden is also capable of inspiring confidence in another to carry theirs. Differences between people–whether small or great–often stem from their own actions.

At the Bengal government's grain warehouse, where Kusher worked, there was always a shortage of two or four men. Since the introduction of the five-kilo grain entitlement for the public, the workload at the warehouse had increased even more. But the time being recalled now was not the present, it was the era of the freedom movement.

From thoughts of work, Kusher's mind shifted to where Devan would live, where he would sleep, and where he would sit.

It was a dilapidated dharamshala, yet it was still something, for that was where they lived. At least it wasn't like a city such as Mumbai, where people buy a one-rupee newspaper and sleep on the pavement. Here, at least, ten people could sit together, cook meals, sleep on the floor, hang their belongings on nails hammered into the walls, and there were even two water tanks and two latrines.

Seeing these living arrangements, Kusher's thoughts moved further ahead.

The train reached Howrah station. Two kinds of passengers disembarked. The first were those who had no homes of their own, people who lived in rented rooms and lacked basic comforts. They stepped off the train and headed straight home. The second were those who had no fixed place to go. These passengers lingered in

the waiting rooms to complete their morning routines. But they were fewer in number. Most people moved directly toward their destinations.

After getting off the train, Kusher thought it might cause delays to depend entirely on reaching the lodging first. It would be better to wash their faces and hands here, drink some tea, and then plan the next steps. The sense of burden in his mind had also eased. All the work ahead now felt like climbing a ladder already set in motion.

As soon as he stepped out of the station, Kusher spotted Guleti. Guleti, a man from their own region, drove a rickshaw in Calcutta and lived in the same dharamshala as Kusher. He had come to the station to drop off passengers. The moment he saw Kusher, Guleti called out- “Kusher, let’s go to the lodging. Come, sit on this very rickshaw.”

Speaking in the straightforward manner of a working man, Kusher replied- “Guleti, there are two brothers with me. Let’s drink some tea first, then we’ll move on.”

Guleti felt genuinely happy. After all, from animals to human beings, everyone desires some happiness, no matter what life is like. He was pleased because this was the third group of passengers he had brought, which meant a good, unexpected earning. By “unexpected earning,” he meant work that isn’t tied to fixed hours. Jobs done at odd times often bring better returns. Since these were night passengers, Guleti had earned more in one night than he usually did in three days.

Guleti said- “Is there any limit to tea? Come, let the three brothers drink tea and chew some paan first. After that, we’ll go to the lodging by rickshaw. Is anyone under obligation to start working right this moment? Earning is earning, however little it may be. There’s no compulsion.”

Kusher thought that if he got into a conversation with Guleti about all the news from the village while sipping tea and chewing paan, morning would arrive before they even realized it. So, he

moved ahead and reached the tea stall.

As soon as he arrived, he ran into someone from his own grain depot, the warehouse where he worked as a labourer. That man had also come to drink tea. Seeing Kusher, Sukdev said- “You took quite a long time in the village, Kusher.”

Kusher replied- “Once you go to the village, how can the heart be ready to return? We’re people caught in bonds of affection. Meeting everyone takes time. How are things at work?”

Sukdev said- “Just yesterday evening, twelve trucks arrived.”

Hearing about the twelve trucks–grain-laden vehicles–Kusher felt relieved. He had not only brought Devan along but had also brought him to a place where work was available. In other words, there was now a place for him to begin.

After reaching the dharamshala and putting down their bundles, it would be best to first meet Banerji Dada. By the time they reached the lodging, it would be close to four o'clock, and Banerji Dada would likely have arrived at the warehouse by then. The two of them could then sit down and discuss everything properly.

In the meantime, Sukdev repeated himself and said- “Oh yes, there’s one big piece of news.”

Hearing this, Kusher asked in surprise- “What is it?”

Sukdev replied- “The manager sahib has done something remarkable.”

Kusher asked- “What exactly did he do?”

Sukdev said- “A new M.O. has arrived in the district. He came from a prosperous area, with good food and comfortable living. As soon as he joined, this same officer began lecturing the manager sahib–Banerji Dada–in a roundabout and arrogant way. At that, Dada slapped him twice across the mouth. He was alone at the time, but we all gathered in support of Dada. The M.O., shaken and stunned, quietly took his leave.”

Kusher asked- “And what happened after that?”

Sukdev replied- "What else? The M.O., angry and embarrassed, went straight to the D.M. Sahib. Dada followed him soon after. But the moment the D.M. Sahib saw Banerji Dada, he firmly told the M.O. to first learn who Banerji Dada really is. Only then, he said, would the officer know how to work with him. The D.M. brushed aside everything the M.O. had reported and told Dada, 'What's done is done. Forget it. Everyone has to work together in the same place. So live like brothers and move your work forward.'"

Kusher asked- "Did Dada say anything after that?"

Sukdev replied- "What would he say? He's a generous man. He just laughed and let it go."

After chewing paan, the three of them left for the dharamshala by rickshaw. Happiness filled Kusher's heart, the kind of happiness that arises from purposeful work, the kind that brings meaning to life. A similar sense of promise awakened in his mind. Quickly, he hung his bundle on a nail and set off to meet Banerji Dada, with Devan following close behind.

As on every other day, Banerji Dada had arrived at the warehouse at four in the morning and was already immersed in work. Officially, he held the post of manager and earned his livelihood through the job, but in truth, he was more of a social worker. He maintained a strict personal discipline. Every day, he arrived at the warehouse by four, opened the gates and locks himself, and within two hours planned and organised the day's entire workload. By six o'clock, he would assign tasks to the labourers and then quietly withdraw.

Yet he maintained such a relationship with the workers that even in his absence, the daily operations continued smoothly. He had also made one rule very clear: there should be no irregularity in the accounting of the grain sacks. However, any rice or wheat that spilled from torn or cut sacks would belong to the labourers. This spillage would not be deducted from their wages.

Because of this policy, each labourer received more than

three seers of rice or wheat every day.

This additional income–separate from wages–brought a modest but meaningful improvement to the lives of the labourers. In contrast, workers whose wages included no such extra provisions lived under much harsher conditions. The daily gain of three seers of grain helped ease the problem of food insecurity among the workers.

Similarly, when the general public began receiving five kilos of grain per person per month, a small degree of relief entered daily life. As the burden of food expenses lessened, the resulting savings began to offer partial solutions to other basic needs as well.

The five kilos of rice and wheat that each person receives do not come without reason. Receiving them means receiving a constitutional right. The more equality that enters the structures of power and society, the more freedom people gain. This right is the result of many years of struggle, a struggle in which countless poor individuals were jailed, beaten, and subjected to many forms of suffering. Its outcome is the monthly provision of five kilos of rice and wheat as a basic sustenance.

Between the eighth and ninth decades, that is, the years around 1980 to 1990, the country became self-reliant in food grains. Before that, grain had to be imported. On one hand, there was the burden of centuries of colonial subjugation; on the other, no proper agricultural system existed, which prevented significant increases in farm production. Despite having natural resources, scarcity continued.

Population growth is also influenced by climate, and growth under such conditions is natural. The variety of climates found in India does not exist in most other countries. If that were not the case, a country like Canada–whose land area is far larger than India's–would not have a population equal to just one Indian state. While India's population exceeds one billion and thirty crore, Canada's population stands at only four or five crore.

Even though the fundamental problems of life include food,

clothing, shelter, health, education, and security, the most basic and immediate issue for the people has always been food. Even today, full sufficiency has not been achieved, but within the ongoing scarcity, there is at least something. Because of this, some degree of improvement has certainly made its way into people's lives.

Everyone knows that where poverty prevails, people consume more grain. In our own social gatherings and feasts, grain is still calculated at about half a kilo per person. Roughly speaking, ten kilos of grain sustains one person for ten days. In comparatively well-off families, grain consumption is not as high because their physical labour is less intense than that of the poor, and they are not solely dependent on grain for sustenance. They have access to many patterns of eating and drinking that are unavailable to the deprived.

Where the most basic need–food–remains unresolved even after seventy-five years of independence and life in a free nation, how can the other needs–clothing, housing, health, education, and security–be anything but distant illusions?

With Devan beside him, Kusher reached the warehouse. Just as Kusher was familiar to Banerji Dada, Banerji Dada was equally familiar to Kusher. Seeing that the warehouse was already open, with the main gate unlocked, Kusher went directly to him. Banerji Dada was busy tallying the accounts for the twelve trucks.

After a brief pause, Kusher said- "Pranam, Dadaji."

In fact, the moment Kusher had entered the gate, Banerji Dada had already recognised him. He briefly lifted his eyes, identified him, and returned to his work. Seeing an unfamiliar face like Devan with Kusher did not spark any particular curiosity, some days familiar faces arrive, on others unfamiliar ones do.

As soon as Kusher greeted him, Banerji Dada lifted his pen from the paper, turned slightly toward Kusher, and replied- "Pranam."

Wise people prefer to express their thoughts in as few words as possible, and Banerji Dada was no exception. Kusher, who knew him well, also understood that Dada's focus lay more in work than

in conversation. The matter of Devan's employment had already slipped from Kusher's mind, as the sheer abundance of work stood clearly before his eyes: twelve truckloads of goods and only eight labourers on site. No matter how intensely they worked, at least four truckloads would remain untouched.

Kusher said- "Dada, I've just returned from the village. On the way, I heard about the altercation with the M.O. Sahib, so I came straight here, marking my attendance along the way."

To say that one hadn't entered the crowd or taken part in the quarrel, how could that truly be? And yet, why couldn't it be so? Suppose someone wasn't present at the scene of the dispute, neither saw it nor heard it directly, then how would they become a party to it? But once the matter reached their ears, and once they began to think about it, question it, and weigh it, how could they remain entirely uninvolved?

In the ordinary flow of life, just as many kinds of problems arise and the doer responds to them according to the moment and moves forward, Banerji Dada did the same. As a result, no great disturbance entered the rhythm of life. Banerji Dada said- "There was no serious quarrel. It was an ordinary matter. So it passed as it came."

Although Banerji Dada was speaking with Kusher, his gaze rested on Devan. Since Kusher said nothing about him, Banerji Dada did not draw Devan into the conversation. Yet, simply by looking at him, a quiet unease stirred within. In every field, whether social, economic, political, or even in science and literature, when a new person comes close, when a connection begins to form, there is always the possibility that this person may one day become much like oneself.

Of course, society has its strange customs: if one finds gold, one must perform penance; and if one loses it, penance must still be performed. In any case, gold is only gold. However valuable it may be, it is without consciousness. A human being is not like that. A person is not only valuable, but conscious, aware, and responsive.

Yet none of this directly concerned either Banerji Dada or Kusher. Each was living his own life, sustaining himself according to his own responsibilities.

Kusher said- “After getting down from the train and returning from the village, I met Sukdev at the tea stall near the station. He told me everything. So I thought it would be better to meet you first and put my mind at ease.”

Hearing Kusher’s words, Banerji Dada felt quietly pleased, though he did not say much. He simply asked- “How are things in the village, Kusher?”

Kusher replied- “What can the village’s condition be, Dada? Like a wedding pavilion without rain, it looks festive enough, but something vital is missing. That is the state of the village.”

Listening to Kusher, Banerji Dada understood that something essential in village life was being lost. Still, he did not feel it was the right moment to speak openly about its virtues or its decline. He simply asked- “What do you mean by that, Kusher?”

Kusher said- “The village is as it is. Some villages have certainly been cut off and ravaged by the Kosi and Kamla rivers and have become almost deserted. Yet, however barren they may have become, flesh and blood remain the same. But the real matter is…”

At the words “the real matter,” Kusher fell silent. Just as someone who criticises his own home is often seen as a traitor, the same thought crossed his mind. Banerji Dada, meanwhile, remained attentive to the rhythm of his daily routine. He was the kind of man who carried out each task exactly when its time came. No matter how many responsibilities lay before him, he never appeared flustered.

Yet the question of the village–Kusher’s question–struck Banerji Dada with such force that his thoughts began to slip out of control. Despite his usual self-restraint, the mind did not obey. He asked again- “What is it, Kusher?”

Kusher replied- “When people of the village are being forced to leave, how will the village ever progress?”

Hearing this, Banerji Dada sensed that Kusher was speaking from lived experience. In such cases, it was not right to press further. What Kusher spoke of was visible to everyone, though each person viewed it through their own lens.

We see that when students from villages become doctors or engineers, they leave for the cities and settle there permanently. The troubling question is this: in conditions of hardship and scarcity, illness continues to spread in village life, yet there are no doctors. And although this is an agrarian country, there are no machines in the fields, no engineers, no agricultural experts. This is the condition of the village.

Drums are beaten loudly, proclaiming that the country's production is among the highest in the world. Let us consider this from two perspectives. First, the country has about two hundred eighty million hectares of cultivable land. True, land measurement varies widely across regions and states, so exact precision is difficult. But if we roughly calculate one hectare as equal to two and a half bighas, then the potential grain yield from this cultivable land–judging by the standards of countries like Japan or Germany–would be nearly three billion tons. But how much do we actually produce? Is it even three hundred million tons today?

Whatever the reality may be, neither Banerji Dada nor Kusher concerned themselves with such calculations. Their focus was simple: if the government grain warehouse continued to stand and operate, then they too would continue to stand and work.

While arranging the next task, Banerji Dada said- "So, Kusher, you'll start work from today, won't you?"

Sensing the moment was right, Kusher replied- "Why should I come alone? Both brothers will come."

At the mention of "both brothers," the curiosity that had earlier stirred in Banerji Dada's mind returned. He asked Devan- "Son, have you also come to work?"

Devan nodded slightly and said- "Yes."

Hearing that "yes" from Devan startled Banerji Dada. What

struck him was this: just as the world keeps changing, so do human beings and their lives. Yet people rarely listen to this truth with attentive ears. As a result, life swings between hope and despair, satisfaction and dissatisfaction. But if one gives direction to change and looks at life through that lens, then that itself becomes the search for meaning. And when a person finds the current of their own life, they flow within it, eventually merging into the greater stream, like a river into the sea.

Of course, Devan would not understand this yet. Understanding develops gradually, as one is introduced to work and thoughtful engagement. Only then does a person begin to grasp human values. At once, Banerji Dada reflected that even an ordinary piece of iron is drawn toward a magnet, but the magnetic quality does not arise in the iron until it has been heated and shaped. Now that Devan had come into contact, with such a strong and well-built body, the question was how to awaken the spirit within that body.

Banerji Dada then asked Devan- "Son, who all are there in your family?"

Devan replied- "My father and mother are there. My sister lives at her in-laws' home. There is no other brother."

Until now, Banerji Dada had assumed that Devan was Kusher's biological younger brother. Hearing this, he asked,

"So who is Kusher to you?"

Devan answered- "A brother."

For a moment, a question rose in Banerji Dada's mind. Devan had not mentioned Kusher earlier as a brother, yet now he called him one. But then another thought followed. A brother is not only one born of the same parents. Along with blood relations, there are also bonds of choice and commitment. And for brotherhood, the whole world lies open. A brother, after all, is someone who gives you the strength to build a fearless life.

Banerji Dada said- "Kusher, as on other days, you will remain at the warehouse until six today as well. The farmers' movement is going on, and I have to take part. So my schedule has

no fixed boundary."

Kusher replied- "Both brothers will come."

Banerji Dada said- "Very good. If time allows, come again. Otherwise, the work must not stop." ❑

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Three months had passed. Devan had now managed to send money home for the third time. He was waiting for someone from the village who might be travelling back, so he could send the money through them.

Just as his father, Dhanushdhari, felt reassured, so too did Jalesari's heart find peace. The son she had once considered awkward and incapable was no longer the same. He had become steady and dependable. If he continued in this way, he would surely be able to support the family, and the household would begin to move forward instead of remaining stagnant.

Since the beginning of time, ever since families first formed, people and their ancestors have survived through such perseverance. Had it not been so, how would the present have come to be? This has always been the course of history, and now, it must be reshaped to meet the demands of the present. The responsibility lies with everyone.

Content with the life of the past two months, Dhanushdhari said to his wife- "It has become necessary to arrange Devan's marriage."

But Jalesari already held a fixed notion in her mind. In the village, she had seen many men like Devan, men considered weak and unpromising, who neither married nor found any stability in life. Speaking from that belief, she replied- "Who would even ask

for Devan in marriage?"

Hearing his wife's words, a deep conflict stirred within Dhanushdhari. On one hand, he could see that even men in better positions than Devan, stronger in body and more secure financially, often remained unmarried. By comparison, Devan was still on shakier ground.

This was not merely a matter of there being fewer women than men. In fact, there were more than enough suitors. The true issue lay elsewhere. Marriage meant shouldering not just the future responsibility of children, but also the immediate responsibility of a wife, another life entirely. Carrying that weight required maturity, judgment, and readiness.

Then, suddenly, a realization dawned on Dhanushdhari, like the sun breaking through a curtain of clouds, frost, and cold mist. He thought that if Devan's body and hands were now strong and capable, and if he had begun earning steadily, then the burdens of food, clothing, shelter, and even medical care during illness, for his parents and for both of them, had not disappeared entirely but had certainly become lighter in the past two months.

A sudden surge of confidence awakened within him, filling his thoughts with quiet satisfaction. The thought was simple and firm: a son who can carry the burden of his parents on his shoulders, serving them like Shravan Kumar, why would he not also be able to care for a wife and children? After all, Devan had only been in Calcutta for three months. As his skills and understanding grew, so too would his capacity to manage a household. And with that growth, he would become alert, purposeful, and capable, living a conscious and responsible life.

Dhanushdhari said- "Is our son any less than someone else's that he should not be married? Men whose sons earn like this are constantly approached by prospective families, and yet Devan should remain unmarried?"

Shifting the thought in a different direction, Jalesari replied- "Yes, we see that even Somman Babu, whose body is hardly strong,

was able to marry such a beautiful bride, just for the sake of his money.”

Bridging the gap between his thinking and his wife's, Dhanushdhari said- “As long as people have not understood Devan, there is darkness. But once they truly know and recognise him, will Devan remain just Devan? He will become the kind of warrior who can support not just one but several families, with such steadiness that even the cleverest schemes would crumble before him.”

Though Dhanushdhari believed he had presented a sound and thoughtful argument to his wife, Jalesari’s mind was turned in a different direction. She misunderstood it, much like someone mistaking a cuckoo for a crow’s chick simply because of its dark color. What people forget is that the crow’s ancient lineage traces back to the cuckoo itself, yet when they see a small, dark bird, they assume it to be the crow’s offspring. Similarly, in folktales, a cat is called the tiger’s aunt merely by its facial features. Whether or not the cat is as carnivorous as the tiger, the title of “aunt” is given based on appearance alone.

In the same way, a sudden shift occurred in Jalesari’s mind. Just as life takes unexpected bends–changing its shape and direction at every turn–something within her also began to change. She said- “If our son is awkward and weak, even then, the red mark of marriage isn’t out of reach, is it? At least no one will call him childless, nor will he die without someone to light his pyre or perform his last rites.”

Seeing the change in his wife’s thinking, Dhanushdhari replied- “Since ancient times, people have given birth to children ranging from those as strong as iron ploughs to those completely frail and broken. Has anyone ever said that such children should be cast aside or abandoned?”

Just then, by chance, Dhanushdhari’s maternal cousin, Ramesar, arrived. Being younger, he bowed, touched the feet of the elder couple, and then sat down.

He said- “Brother, for the past five days, Gauri Bhai has not

let me rest in peace, so I've come."

Hearing the unease in Ramesar's voice, a restlessness stirred in Dhanushdhari's heart as well. He asked- "Why hasn't Gauri Bhai let you be at peace?"

Ramesar replied- "Brother, arrange Devan's marriage. The household is good, and the family lineage is respectable."

This wasn't talk of the lineage of cows or buffaloes, nor of fruit trees, but of human lineage.

The moment he heard the word lineage, Dhanushdhari's mind began to whirl like a spinning top. His own thoughts questioned him sharply. The son whom he and others had long considered awkward and incapable, how had a marriage proposal for him come from another village? How had they even learned that Devan was unmarried and worthy of their daughter?

It had never occurred to Dhanushdhari that once a son becomes self-reliant and begins to earn, his reputation begins to spread. In Calcutta, many people from their own region were seeing Devan up close. Though new to the city, he worked and earned like an experienced hand. Month after month, he sent a portion of his earnings home to his parents.

Hearing Ramesar's proposal, Dhanushdhari reflected quietly that Devan was indeed his son, but it was Kusher who had set him firmly on his path. To give an answer without first consulting Kusher would not be right. Moreover, Devan himself had grown into a young man, and his opinion now mattered. A father may understand and explain the weight of responsibility, but the son, too, has a role to play.

At the mention of marriage, Jalesari's heart was already swelling with happiness. Dhanushdhari remained silent, but Jalesari spoke- "Why shouldn't we arrange Devan's marriage?"

Hearing her words, Ramesar readily accepted that the matter was settled and that Devan's marriage would indeed take place. He felt their journey had begun under a good sign, and it had borne auspicious fruit. This was no ordinary matter but one of kinship and

alliance, a discussion involving two families and two communities. It could not be approached hastily.

Ramesar said- “Brother, this concerns a family alliance, so it cannot be rushed. For now, understand this much: Devan’s name has been put forward from the bride’s side.”

Just as all parents cherish the hope of a well-mannered son, one through whom learning, earning, and self-reliance deepen their satisfaction and carry their sense of fulfilment to its peak, so it was with Dhanushdhari and his wife. To witness firsthand a son’s work, the fruits of that work, and the maturity of his thinking is, naturally, a source of great joy for parents. That same feeling had now taken root in both of them.

Filled with wonder, Dhanushdhari said- “Ramesar, whatever else may be, you are my younger brother. To lie to you would be like killing a cow, and such an act would be a grave wrong. Tell me honestly, if Devan has now become a young, earning man who can build a family through his own labour, then surely he has also become capable of marriage, hasn’t he?”

Caught between Dhanushdhari’s reasoning and the weight of social expectations, Ramesar’s thoughts became tangled. On one hand, a question rose within him: what kind of father is one who cannot shoulder the responsibility of his own son’s marriage? It was not an empty question. In earlier times, during the days of bondage and uncertainty, when human life was fragile and short-lived, parents had devised the practice of child marriage to ensure that their ancestral duties could be fulfilled within a limited span. It was their way of discharging the responsibilities of parenthood.

On the other side stood the present reality of a country that had lived in freedom for seventy-five years. This new environment had brought such firmness to people's thinking that sons and daughters now openly defied the marital decisions made by their parents. In such circumstances, it had become difficult to say with certainty what was right and what was wrong.

Between marriage and the act of giving it away, dowry had

risen like a devouring pit in society, crushing the dreams of countless minds into dust. Even thought has its own chain, where one idea links to the next. But if one tries to join a link of gold with a link of iron, can the chain ever remain balanced? Of course not. That is the fundamental question.

No matter how noble or well-intentioned an act may be, if the steps that follow it stray from the path of righteousness and descend into compromise, will the original deed remain radiant? Or will it too become dulled and sullied, like mud?

Standing at this uneasy intersection between tradition and change, between life and death, Ramesar said- “Brother, you speak to Devan, and I will speak to him as well. We’ll proceed according to what he decides.”

Hearing this calm and thoughtful suggestion from Ramesar, Dhanushdhari replied- “Ramesar, just as I gave birth to Devan, Kusher gave shape to his path and purpose. We must at least tell Kusher this much: Ramesar is no outsider. If he wishes to support the family as his own, then his help will be as smooth as clarified butter. Along with his labour, time will also be saved.”

Meanwhile, Jalesari, seated nearby, was churning inwardly. The cause of her agitation lay in what she saw in other families of the village, where parents arranged the marriages of their sons and daughters on their own. Why then, she wondered, should she lose her own honour? Honour may take many forms, but in Jalesari’s mind, it had assumed a shape unlike that in others.

She said- “Are we already dead, like the parents of other sons, that we must ask others before marrying off our own child?”

Hearing Jalesari’s words, Ramesar felt the weight of his own coming and going, the consequences his visit might bring. At the same time, a quiet resentment stirred in Dhanushdhari’s heart toward his wife. His resentment came from this: that Devan had grown into a complete human being through Kusher’s guidance and support, and arranging his marriage without first consulting Kusher would be wrong.

Another thought also surfaced in him: this illness was not Jalesari's alone, society itself was afflicted. What she spoke in haste, she later clung to as if it were settled truth.

Brushing aside Jalesari's words like passing clouds, Dhanushdhari said- "Ramesar, we are all among our own people. There is no need for haste in this matter. Everyone will think carefully and bring the task to a proper conclusion. In time, we too will be relieved of the burden of our children."

In these past three months, Devan had won Banerji Dada's trust so completely that the man felt he could almost retire with Devan by his side. This trust had taken root in Banerji Dada's mind because, from the day Devan entered the warehouse, certain qualities had begun to appear in him that set him apart from the other labourers. Chief among them was his honesty, and not the kind worn like a mask, but the kind revealed through action. Such people are rare in the world.

Perhaps it is bound to be rare. In a society where initiation comes first and education–knowledge and skill–is delayed until later, how could corruption not take root? How could such a society avoid decay, when its way of life moves in step with time through distorted actions?

But what exists, exists where it does. And so it was. Of this, neither Banerji Dada nor Devan was particularly concerned.

Watching Devan at work, Banerji Dada had become so deeply impressed that whatever thought or idea Devan expressed about life, he would weigh it carefully, reflect on it, and often put it into practice. Once, Devan offered a strikingly simple and thoughtful suggestion. Trucks were being unloaded two hundred metres from the warehouse, and the grain was then carried in manually. In the process, labourers lifted sacks weighing one hundred kilograms–a full quintal–on their backs. Wouldn't it be far easier, Devan asked, to use handcarts instead of human backs?

Over a distance of two hundred metres, carrying a one-hundred-kilogram sack is an invitation to disaster. A single misstep

could result in death. And even if not death, then permanent injury or lifelong disability. If such danger can be avoided through a simpler and safer method, why should that method not be used?

At times, Banerji Dada also felt a quiet remorse. He wondered whether he had ever truly understood the suffering of those whose hardship he had witnessed for years. The world is there to be seen–and everyone sees it–but true vision begins only when one looks at the world after first looking inward. The world itself is full of ridges and hollows, mountains and oceans.

Because of Devan's work, Banerji Dada had become so free of worry about the warehouse that even when government officials arrived, or when relatives and guests needed to be received and looked after, he knew Devan already possessed the necessary qualities. The capacity for responsible conduct and thoughtful hospitality had quietly taken root in him.

At times, Banerji Dada reflected that a human being is not a clay idol, shaped once and fixed forever. Within every living person lies the possibility of inner consecration: through righteous action, one may rise to a godlike stature, or cleanse oneself simply by bathing the mind. The grime of the body can be washed away with the hands, but how Devan would grow into a life shaped by the subtle and priceless laws of creation remained a question that danced continually in Banerji Dada's mind.

Just as the material objects of the world keep changing, so too does human life. One is born helpless. With time, one grows. Life begins with play and carefree wandering, then moves on to school, then to family, society, and beyond. The body travels this same course, from childhood to youth, to maturity, and finally to old age. This is the shared rhythm of all bodies, and within that rhythm pulses the inner force of being itself.

If one cannot truly see oneself, how can one possibly see the world? For the world is knotted and complex beyond measure. Who could ever see it in full? Inwardly, everyone wishes to live with ease and contentment. Yet the daily demands of family–salt, oil, and the

bare necessities–press so hard that life begins to feel like a mango on a battered branch, its sap so dried up that it's hard to say when one is truly alive and when one is not.

Having lived in Calcutta for five years, Kusher had come to understand, through experience upon experience, that human beings, according to their age and labour, should, if possible, also receive rest and nourishment. But this becomes possible only when the rhythms of life are grounded in trust and balance. Each person shapes a life based on their means of earning. A life well-shaped brings stability, while a poorly shaped life begins to bend, falter, and eventually turn against itself. When an individual or a community develops in the wrong direction, it inevitably gives rise to a distorted way of living as well.

Yet it is not easy to clearly distinguish between what is natural and what is distorted. Why not? One can see plainly that the roots of trees lie buried in the soil, while the human head rises toward the sky. Trees, however generous and full of fruit they may be, can only go so far in distributing the fruits of their lives while remaining rooted in the earth. It is something else entirely that the fruits of Mithila now travel in vehicles to far-off places, even to other countries. In that journey, human hands and human ingenuity are indispensable.

Human beings are a singular kind of creature, carrying the weight of their lives upon themselves as they move forward.

During his years in Calcutta, Kusher had gathered many life experiences that he had hoped to share with Devan in thoughtful form. But the pressure of constant work had dulled the edge of his memory. When a thought came to mind, he would be engaged in some other task, and when the moment arrived to speak, the thought itself would slip away. In this way, three months passed. Yet those unspoken thoughts remained buried within him like a tender sapling hidden beneath the soil, still quietly growing, bending and twisting downward, unseen.

By chance, a moment finally arrived. The following day

happened to be the warehouse's foundation day. On that date, long ago, the warehouse had begun its operations, and ever since, the day was observed annually as a holiday. Though work was officially suspended, the labourers who depended on daily wages inevitably faced a loss of income. However, in this warehouse, an arrangement had been made. Those not on monthly salaries were given a gift equal to one day's earnings.

Even so, the labourers still experienced a loss, because on regular working days they also received grain from torn or damaged sacks–considered part of their informal share–and this benefit was absent on holidays. On the other hand, their bodies were spared the strain of labour for the day.

On foundation day, government officials and warehouse workers typically gathered to celebrate and talk freely about life. These conversations extended beyond personal matters to include topics like governance and authority.

It so happened that no government official could attend the programme that year. It was the time of the lockdown, and everyone was caught up in health department duties. Only Banerji Dada was present, representing the government.

The arrangements were well organised, with proper seating, food, and refreshments. A day earlier, Banerji Dada had informed all workers that attendance was compulsory. Although work would be suspended, there would be discussions about departmental activities, light-hearted conversation, and a shared meal. In addition, each worker would receive a gift equal to a day's wages, counted as compensation for the lost workday.

At the appointed time, everyone gathered in the hall constructed in front of the warehouse. In organising the programme, Devan's contribution had been as significant as Banerji Dada's. Before the formal sitting began, refreshments were served, tea, snacks, and paan. It is often the case that when a group of people share food together, a single mood settles over their minds, and even taste and thought begin to move in harmony.

Sensing the moment as an opportunity, Banerji Dada felt quietly pleased. Today, he thought, he would sit as a labourer among labourers, elevate the workers to the position of officers, and speak with them freely. Even on ordinary days, whenever time allowed, Banerji Dada would speak openly with the workers. Through those conversations, he had come to understand that as many people as there are in the world, so many worlds exist. There is a shared world, but within each person, there is also a world of their own. Yet how exactly this worked often left him perplexed.

This perplexity arose because his thinking had been shaped by certain inherited social ideas, and where those ideas clashed with others, conflict naturally appeared. Still, his mind never fully accepted the possibility that his understanding might be narrow or incomplete. And yet, it would not rest. Again and again, it whispered that those one defends might themselves one day stand accused. Therefore, to truly understand the world of the workers, one must think from within the framework of their lived experience. Only then can the roots of things be grasped.

The time, too, seemed appropriate. The boundary that existed between him and them was itself the path of life. Standing on that path, one could look ahead and examine one's condition and direction. Banerji Dada had not fully realised how creation, memory, and lived knowledge move alongside action. Knowledge, in its condensed form, remained within his mind, yet he could not see clearly beyond the dim half-light that stretched ahead.

By now, tea and refreshments had been served, but the ceremony itself had still not taken a formal shape. As often happens, everyday conversation flowed so naturally among everyone that the structured proceedings of the programme were quietly set aside. This kind of thing occurs daily, sitting in a shop over tea and snacks, all kinds of matters are discussed. What, then, was so unusual that the ceremony should be seen as disrupted?

Besides, everyone understood that ceremony and spectacle now belong to the domain of the media. Take a few photographs, write up a formal summary of the event, send it off, and the

ceremony is considered complete.

The murmuring and whispering one hears in snack stalls and tea shops was flowing through this gathering as well. Everyone carried their own concerns, so for every speaker there was a listener. In other words, pairs formed, and people began talking among themselves in twos.

When Banerji Dada raised his eyes and looked toward the assembly, it became clear to him that there was no shortage of speakers or listeners. Then who, he wondered, would listen to his words? And with that came another question: who truly listens to whom? Who understands another's joy or sorrow, or grasps the rhythm and structure of a life?

Seated there, Banerji Dada wandered into a dense forest of thought where only two figures remained, himself and Devan. The two of them stood apart for a simple reason: they were occupied with managing the arrangements of the programme.

In that lostness of mind, a thought was waiting for Banerji Dada. When everyone is absorbed in their own tune, why should the two of us not tune ourselves as well, and patiently attune ourselves to each life, one by one? Why not grasp the threads of the varied and distinct lives of each labourer? Seeing their work, a quiet happiness rose in his heart, the sense that life itself gives both breath and meaning.

Yet human beings are still human, more fickle even than a slippery fish. At one moment, a person darts away in the water; the next, flung onto a plate, they gasp and fall still. There is no certainty. And then Banerji Dada’s own mind told him: however slippery a person may be, like the most elusive fish, it is not true that the fisherman of life never catches them. Whether in water or on a plate, they are caught eventually.

There were ten or twelve labourers working in the warehouse, so the gathering itself was small. Yet even that mattered. Just as learning to count to a hundred requires a hundred objects–because without them, a hundred remains only a symbol–so too with lives.

Until each life is properly counted, life itself cannot be understood in its true sense. Otherwise, one cannot even grasp the difference between the cycles of twelve months and four.

Everyone knows that in twelve months, the joys and sorrows of all three seasons–winter, summer, and rain–are contained. But in four months, only one season prevails, even if its melody flows in one unbroken tone.

Gathering his attention–attention meaning the matter at hand–Banerji Dada brought his mind into focus. As soon as it settled, his thoughts began to drift inward, and seemed to speak to him: just as a human being has an outward form, visible on the surface, so too there is an inner form. Just as virtues and flaws appear in many colours externally, they exist within as well. Objects and ideas are such that what proves beneficial to one person in one place does not necessarily become harmful in another. But the craft hidden in between–the subtle workmanship–can only be handled by those who understand its delicacy. To others, it remains scattered and indistinct.

Even when people appear outwardly similar, differences arise in thought and in the actions of life itself. Wherever Banerji Dada's mind wandered across the landscape of life, he saw the same thing: people standing at the same boundary, yet churning restlessly within. This stirred a quiet protest in his mind. Into what unnecessary entanglements have we fallen? Though everyone stands within their own limits, they fail to recognise those limits, and instead seek to define and impose the boundaries of others.

After all, even a single embankment contains hundreds of bighas of land, and there are hundreds of landholders as well. Boundaries and ridges are drawn for each plot, so that everyone knows which field is their own. Whenever someone goes to the embankment–whether for work or simply to look around–they inevitably reach the edge of their own field. In the same way, if the boundary of one's life were clearly drawn, then like the yield of one's field, one would also come to know their own sense of duty: who they are, and what their responsibility is.

So why should one not think, reflect, and act to shape the road ahead–the road of life–and keep moving forward? And yet, there exists a darkness of such depth that people say, even the physician beside you will die. But even such sayings do not come true on their own. Good thoughts may reside within the mind, but one must refrain from voicing them everywhere. If they remain only words, they risk doing more harm than good. Life has been seized by such dense darkness that it has become impossible to tell when the mouth will call day night, or night day.

Lost in his own thoughts, Banerji Dada sat in quiet astonishment.

Still in that state, his mind seemed to whisper that not everyone lives desiring the love of the whole world, nor does everyone seek to worship the world through their own love. Yet...

As this thought unfolded, Banerji Dada beckoned Devan closer with a gesture of his hand. As Devan approached, he asked- “Dada, does the direction of the gathering seem right to you?”

Devan’s question wasn’t difficult, but it struck a hard truth. When everyone is absorbed in their own rhythms and distractions, how can a collective thought become harmonious? Until there is unity in shared thinking, how can it stand firmly within society?

At once, however, Banerji Dada’s mind turned toward Devan himself and reflected on his life. Devan was still at a stage where he would understand slowly, step by step. This was his first real step into life. Shifting his thoughts, Banerji Dada replied- “Devan, the taste we hoped for has not yet emerged.”

Devan could not fully grasp the inner weight of Banerji Dada’s words. Still, he had to respond to the question before him. He said- “Does the taste of any one thing feel the same to everyone?”

In Devan’s words, Banerji Dada sensed a rare and valuable essence. Yet he could not tell whether Devan spoke from a deep understanding of that essence or simply as part of the natural flow of conversation. This uncertainty arose naturally. It often happens

that, whether or not someone understands a subject in depth, they may still raise questions in discussion that prove essential to the heart of the matter.

As thoughts stirred, Banerji Dada's mind moved back and forth. Steadying himself, he said- "Devan, everyone sitting here today is a labourer. Whether they are farmhands in the fields, workers in the warehouse, or engaged in other kinds of work under different names, their purpose is the same: to earn a living and sustain life."

Hearing Banerji Dada's steady reasoning, Devan replied- "Yes, that is true."

The moment Devan said- "Yes, that is true," Banerji Dada felt an inner assurance awaken. It seemed to him that Devan was beginning to stand at the edge of his own life, aware of its boundaries. He said- "Devan, right now ten or twelve labourers are sitting together, talking among themselves. Do you think all of them share the same aim?"

Banerji Dada's thought was as sharply fixed as Arjuna's gaze on the eye of the revolving fish in the Mahabharata. Yet Devan's eyes did not meet the eye of that thought. He fell silent, lost in himself. Banerji Dada understood this silence, but still, he felt it wise to wait a moment. After a brief pause, he said- "Devan, among the labourers here, there are many kinds of dispositions and qualities. But leave that aside for now. At this moment, we must focus on one broad question: what does your own mind say?"

The word look stirred something in Devan. He immediately interjected- "What should we look at, broadly speaking?"

Hearing the question, Banerji Dada turned inward and reflected. He sensed that Devan did not yet have the vocabulary to express his inner reflections clearly. But the feeling was there, even if the words were not. And even when words fail, gestures and bearing can still speak. Banerji Dada said- "Devan, among all the labourers here, observe how many have been doing the same work for how many years. After that, we will think further."

Devan had only been working in the warehouse for three months. He didn't know much about everyone yet. Speaking plainly, he said- "Dada, when I myself am new, how can I understand those who are old? I don't know."

This admission–simple and honest–carried its own quiet truth.

Simple-minded Devan, naïve and unshaped, stood like a blank sheet of paper when it came to thought. Seeing his straightforwardness, Banerji Dada felt a firm resolve rise within him: Devan was new now, but if he could grasp the essence of work, he could also come to understand the essence of life. So why not show him life itself, point out the path by which life is shaped?

One's duty is not merely to point and withdraw, nor to seize another's hands and feet and bind them to one's own. What is possible, however, is to do the work oneself and let it be seen. Where help is needed, and where something can be achieved by gently guiding another's hands and feet, that alone becomes true assistance. Without such rightful help between people, how can any harmony arise in society? Through acts of help, action circulates. The kind of help one gives through work shapes not only the present task but also what comes before and after in life. The task itself is only the middle point.

Gesturing with his eyes, Banerji Dada indicated the row of men sitting on the earthen platform behind them and said- "Devan, the four men sitting back there have been working here for more than thirty years."

Taking it in an ordinary way, Devan replied- "Then by now they must be fit for retirement."

Hearing this, Banerji Dada laughed. The laugh rose like the itch of a healing wound. When one scratches an itch, there is a strange pleasure, yet it is never free of a faint burn. Something similar stirred in Banerji Dada's mind. Devan did not yet understand the ways of the world, and so he spoke like this. Had he understood, he would have known that in the world, when one

house is filled with laughter, another is surely filled with tears. And in between lies our own place, and the qualities we choose to speak of.

Gathering his thoughts, Banerji Dada said- “Devan, warehouse labourers do not retire. They leave only when their bodies are exhausted. They don’t receive pensions like government employees.”

Devan lifted his eyes toward the back platform and said- “Dada, one of them is still coming here on a stretcher.”

Banerji Dada responded- “That would be good. Let him place his thoughts before everyone.”

Devan went over to Hardev and said- “Guruji, Dada is calling you.”

Here, guruji referred to someone like the master of a wrestling pit–the senior among apprentices–much like a tailor’s ustad among his trainees. Hardev was talking with Sahdev. At Devan’s call, Sahdev also rose to his feet and stepped forward, saying- “Come then, let both brothers go together.”

Hardev and Sahdev walked up to Banerji Dada. As soon as they reached him, Banerji Dada asked- “Hardev Dada, are you the one who has been working here the longest?”

Hardev replied- “Sahdev and I both came to Calcutta from the village on the same day. We’re from the same village as well, and we started working in this warehouse together. Banerji bhai, you were already connected to this warehouse even before your official appointment.”

Banerji Dada already knew this, so without repeating the question he said directly- “How long have you two been working here?”

Sahdev was quicker to respond than Hardev. While Hardev tried to recall the year, Sahdev said- “The big earthquake happened that year.”

Catching the reference to the earthquake of 1934, Banerji

Dada said- “Then it’s been more than thirty years.”

Sahdev replied- “The exact number of years isn’t so clear anymore, but ever since our bodies were strong and our limbs firm, the work we took up back then is the work we are still doing today.”

Just as the gift of a single life brings different kinds of happiness to different kinds of people, Banerji Dada too found a quiet joy in Sahdev’s temperament and way of life. That joy swelled within him to such an extent that he felt the urge to churn the ocean of memory itself. Yet he hesitated, uncertain where to begin Sahdev’s life story. It was like hearing a couplet of poetry that moves even the blind and deaf to exclaim “wah, wah” in delight. One corner of Dada’s mind stirred, while another steadied his thoughts into balance.

Banerji Dada said- “Today we are all sitting together and celebrating, and that itself is a matter of happiness. But whether by misfortune or by good fortune, no outsider has come. You two have been working here longer than anyone else. Tell everyone, step by step from the beginning, what you have seen in your lives and what turns your lives have taken. If anyone doesn’t understand some event or idea, they can ask questions later.”

Hearing Banerji Dada’s words, Sahdev felt something that often happens to people: everyone wants to narrate their sorrows openly but keeps their joys hidden away like a thief’s secret. All at once, Sahdev remembered the early days of his journey to Calcutta, which had begun five days before he left the village. It was the year 1934, the year of the great earthquake.

It was the day of Til Sankranti. On that day, the beauty of the village–its fields and pathways, its gardens and groves, its trees and plants–was struck by such a violent force of the earthquake that everything was destroyed in an instant. His village, Laxmipur, had been like Janaki’s garden, filled with flowering and fruit-bearing trees. The fields were granaries of grain. There were more than fifteen ponds and over twenty-five wells, all signs of the village’s strength and abundance.

But the earthquake was so devastating that everything was reduced to ruin. And this destruction was not limited to Laxmipur alone. From Kathmandu to Munger, most villages across the region were laid waste, their lives and landscapes shattered.

Small and young trees did survive here and there in Laxmipur, but not a single mango tree more than ten years old remained standing. As for brick houses, there were none in the village to begin with. Homes were built of mud walls and bamboo posts with thatched roofs. When the earth shook with such violence, everything was smashed to pieces and the ground split open. Sand from the lower layers of the soil rose and spread over the village's fertile land, burying the productive earth beneath it. Ponds and wells collapsed.

Laxmipur, which had once truly lived up to its name, suddenly turned into Kalipur. Life became unbearably difficult. What would people eat, what would they drink, where would they live? Everything lost its footing. One can live only when there are means to live. This was not a time like today, when heavy machines exist to do heavy work. And even now, when such machines are available, vast stretches of fertile land in the country still lie ruined, buried under sand or broken by rivers and ravines. This is all plainly visible before our eyes.

Abandoning hope in the village, both of us, Haridev and I, came to Calcutta.

Sahdev said- "A long time has passed, so not everything remains clear in my memory. Still, whatever I remember, I will say."

Hearing Sahdev's words, a man seated in between interrupted- "What is the use of digging up old sorrows and recalling past pain? Isn't it better to live only in the present and manage with what we have now?"

But Banerji Dada was a man of reason. Whenever a thought reached his ears, he instinctively examined it through logic and reflection. At once, a question rose in his mind: if past events are to

be forgotten or deliberately ignored, then what meaning does the past hold? And why do people labour so much to churn history and understand it?

Countering Dinesh's remark, Banerji Dada said firmly- "If Sahdev wishes to speak, let us listen to all of his thoughts."

The moment Banerji Dada interrupted Dinesh's comment, it came to a halt like a train brought to a sudden stop. In the meantime, Sahdev resumed speaking.

"There was the custom of child marriage in the village," he said. "So my marriage took place when I was still a child, but the gauna had not yet happened. My wife was living at her parents' home. Compared to Laxmipur, the damage in her village was less."

At the mention of his wife's village, Haridev interjected- "Brother, let the thoughts of both of us move together."

Correcting himself, Sahdev continued- "The village we lived in was the same for both of us, but our in-laws' villages, though nearby, were different. In most respects, the two villages were alike. But since they belonged to different parganas, there were differences, just as there are variations in how fields are measured or in the amount of land revenue assessed."

Bringing the discussion back into balance, Banerji Dada said- "The programme is for four hours, so keep the time in mind and move ahead. Were your parents alive?"

Sahdev replied- "My father had passed away, and my brother's mother had died. My own mother, however, was so devoted to work that she always kept the house and courtyard shining. As for my brother's father, he was a man of firm resolve. After his wife died, the villagers urged him again and again to marry a second time. But he stood his ground, saying that even if the whole world were to break apart, he would not abandon his decision."

Seeing Sahdev drifting into detail, Banerji Dada asked- "When did your gauna take place?"

At the word gauna, Sahdev said- “After coming to Calcutta, when we began earning and sending money home to our mother, my gauna took place about a year later.”

Gathering his thoughts, Banerji Dada asked- “How long have you been doing this work as a labourer?”

Expressing the essence of his experience, Sahdev replied- “The day we came to Calcutta, the work we took up then is the work we are still doing today.”

Banerji Dada said- “When people begin to earn and an income starts coming in, they usually try to improve their work as well, making heavy labour a little lighter, a little easier. What happened in your case?”

Sahdev answered- “Just as the labour settled into the body, the earnings settled into life. Where were we to go, and what else were we to do? Whatever thoughts we once had faded away from the mind, and the world began to feel like darkness.”

After saying- “the world began to feel like darkness,” Sahdev fell silent. It was as if the colour had drained from his inner interest; the redness of his face dulled, like a flower on a withered tree turning pale and lifeless.

From signs and silences, Banerji Dada understood much of what lay within Sahdev. But most of those seated at the gathering did not. How could they have? A frog living at the bottom of a well cannot truly grasp the meaning of a flowing river or rolling waves. Life itself is the great teacher. It teaches the reader the knowledge of books, the warrior the art of battle, the singer the craft of song, and the thief the skills of theft.

The lives of the warehouse labourers sitting there had become like those frogs in a well. How, then, could they reshape themselves and move forward? In Banerji Dada’s mind, a strong conviction took shape: until a person understands the flowing current of life in its proper depth, no one can truly stand firm in the present with hope for the future drawn from the past.

But such thought arises only when one’s sense of being

human awakens. It awakens in those who are alive within themselves, not in those whose lives lie half-asleep, almost dead. For them, thought remains trapped within narrow limits, like a once-flowing stream that has dried up and turned into a heap of lifeless sand.

Carrying the reflection forward, Banerji Dada asked Sahdev in a serious voice- “Who all are there in your family?”

Hearing the question- “Who all are there in your family?” Sahdev shuddered, and Haridev too seemed to wilt inwardly. Kusheshwar and a few others felt an urge to speak of their own families as well. But it was Sahdev, shaken yet resolute, who finally spoke- “Banerji Babu, there are sorrows a person learns to endure by taking them like blows to the chest, without ever wishing to speak of them. Still, when you have asked in front of ten people, it does not feel right, at this age, to remain silent.”

Listening to Sahdev, Banerji Dada sensed that somewhere within the course of Sahdev’s life, a hidden spring had not completely dried up. Yet he also understood that one person’s understanding alone could not refill that inner source. The world itself is vast, made of countless universes. All one can do is try, within one’s own strength, to steady one’s life and, in doing so, help steady another’s.

Banerji Dada said- “Silence is not always right. When a person stands close to death, as if on the edge of the gallows, and then becomes a giver of life, it is then that nectar rains from his mouth, like drops falling under the Swati star.”

He continued to reflect inwardly, aware that the dense weight of lived life sitting before him demanded both understanding and patience.

Sahdev went on- “Banerji Babu, you were born somewhere, and I too was born somewhere else. Measured in miles or kilometres, our birthplaces lie hundreds of miles apart. Yet most of our lives have passed together, and will continue to do so. That is why I wish to speak.”

Curiosity sharpened in the gathering. Everyone strained to hear what Sahdev was about to say. Seeing the moment ripen, Banerji Dada said- “Here, we are all brothers, bound in fellowship. If something harsh is spoken, let it be dismissed as harsh. But what is spoken with truth and care will surely find its use in life, sooner or later. So speak without fear.”

Encouraged by Banerji Dada’s support, Sahdev spoke again.

“Banerji Bhai, just as the share of life that I have is mine, the same is true for Haridev Bhai. Yet the direction of our lives has turned in two different ways.”

Ghanshyam, who was seated in the middle, stood up and asked Sahdev- “What do you mean by two different directions, Guruji?”

Sahdev replied- “Son, though both of us have lived lives that were almost lifeless, the reasons behind them are different for each of us.”

As happens when a child hears a new idea or story and curiosity sharpens, the younger labourers felt a similar stir within themselves. One of them stood up and said- “Guruji, today we have set aside work and are celebrating the warehouse’s foundation day. The time we have been given, shouldn’t we shape it according to our own lives?”

Hearing Singheshwar’s words, Banerji Dada felt as though he had tasted the true sweetness of life’s meaning. But for Sahdev, speaking of his defeated life in front of the young stirred a deep bitterness. Still, the force of the mind is such that even those already crushed can feel its weight again. After all, Sahdev was still lifting hundred-kilo sacks on his back.

Seeing Sahdev lost in thought, Banerji Dada urged him firmly- “Do not waste time in silence. Two to two and a half hours have already passed. Only an hour or so remains.”

In Sahdev’s mind, memories of his family–his son and daughter-in-law–and his bonds with them had begun to dissolve like soil merging with earth. In their place, thoughts of his remaining

days grew stronger. He said- “Those of us gathered here at this ceremony, those connected to the warehouse, I consider all of them my family. That is why I feel no hesitation in speaking. First, I will speak about my family, and about Haridev.”

Sensing the gravity in Sahdev’s tone, Banerji Dada straightened up, fully attentive, and said- “Brother, do not feel shy in speaking, do not fear anyone, and do not hold back because a group is sitting before you. This is life. Why should one not speak of one’s own life? And if one does not speak, how will the world ever see or hear it?”

On one side, Sahdev’s heart had begun to bloom with the quiet happiness of forming new bonds of family here. On the other, Banerji Dada’s steady support strengthened him further. With a kind of detached honesty, Sahdev spoke- “I had many hopes from my son and daughter-in-law. My heart was completely set on the belief that just as I am serving my son today, in old age I too would be cared for. But everything slipped away like water. Seven or eight years ago, my wife also passed away. I am left alone, stretched thin from village to marketplace. There is no one in this world who looks after me, no one who asks how I am.”

Trying to bring clarity to the thought, Banerji Dada asked- “What hopes did you place on your son and daughter-in-law, and what actually happened?”

“Both of them left and went off to Bombay. Just as they abandoned me while I was still alive, they did the same to Haridev Bhai. His wife is no longer alive either, and because he has no children, there is no one at all to look after him.”

The ceremony came to an end. Everyone else dispersed. Only Banerji Dada, Devan, and Kusesar remained. Banerji Dada then asked both of them together- “When people do the same kind of work, yet such distances grow between their lives, how can those distances be bridged in a humane way?”

This question did not seek an immediate answer. It lingered in the air as a moral challenge, touching on labour, family,

abandonment, and the fragile threads that still hold human lives together.

Kusesar was not someone who usually sat in circles of abstract debate, and Devan, after all, had only three months of experience behind him. Kusesar's own time was so tightly bound to the demands of his personal life that, setting aside his own joys and sorrows, he rarely found the space to truly see or understand the lives of others. Yet some of the thoughts he had heard during the ceremony continued to churn within his mind. Sahdev replied. Guarding the honesty of his thoughts, Kusesar said- "Dada, what is a single day's feast, and what is a single day's rule? Life is life. It takes the shape we keep holding, kneading, and shaping it into. But the problem is that we're not even getting the chance to understand how to shape it properly. Banerji Dada, you're thoughtful in every sense, and also a man of action. If we talk a little about the roots…?"

Seeing Kusesar's curiosity, Banerji Dada replied- "Each person's life is their own, no doubt. But not that right now. At this moment, what matters is this much: broadly speaking, there are three kinds of outlooks among these workers.

First, there are those of the older generation. Having lost almost everything in the world, with little strength left, they still continue to work, risking their very lives just to keep their bodies going.

Second, there are those who are so entangled and swept away by their family lives that they can no longer see the wider world at all.

And third, there are those who, while carrying themselves along, are also trying to improve the lives of their families and are taking steps toward the future.

But to truly understand this and act upon it, continuity is essential. These discussions will continue. It's grown late now. You should go."

The words brought the conversation to a close, but not the

questions. What remained was the awareness that life does not change in a single meeting or through a single insight. It changes slowly, through sustained thought, shared responsibility, and the courage to keep looking at one another, not as categories, but as human lives unfolding side by side. ❑

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Twelve years passed. During that time, Devan's parents died, and he built a new life with his wife and two children. The bond between Devan and Banerji Dada remained like the connection between day and night, distinct yet inseparable.

Though Devan continued working as a warehouse labourer, he strove to become a fully formed, self-aware human being in both thought and conduct. Still, the fundamental weight of life, the burden that keeps the world in motion, pressed upon him as it did on everyone. Banerji Dada, meanwhile, had a steady job and lived within the boundaries of a secure life. Devan did not.

For four or five years after arriving in Calcutta, Devan listened intently to Banerji Dada's words, taking them as guidance. But the space where his own thinking should have developed remained dim, barely touched. Only after five years did he begin to reflect on what he had heard, testing, reworking, and internalising those ideas. Out of this process came new thoughts and new ways of being. Slowly, Devan began to understand the movement of his own life.

By now, Devan had grasped a basic truth: village life can survive without money, but urban life cannot. In the city or the marketplace, even a single day without cash turns life into a fortress of hardship. That is why keeping his family in the village felt more in tune with the natural rhythms of life. Gradually, a quiet strength awakened within Devan, the strength to imagine his own future.

It is only when the capacity to imagine the future enters a person's thinking that they begin to define the boundaries of their

humanity. The five fundamental elements of life–food, clothing, shelter, health, and education–form the foundation of every human existence. Yet these essentials are never equally available to all. Some always have more, others less. According to the kind of life one inherits, one shapes one's existence. But when life is shaped only by necessity, it ceases to be human and slips into something closer to an animal state.

How could it be otherwise? An animal lives under the constant demands of feeding itself, finding shelter, and protecting against illness. Whether it understands these needs or not makes little difference. But a human being is different. Gifted with the ability to understand, a human being recognises the meaning and value of food, clothing, shelter, health, and education.

Devan, too, has always kept these basic elements firmly rooted in his mind. He reflects constantly on the fact that within his family and his society, he has been living an isolated life. To make that life balanced and humane would not be his task alone; it would require the participation of both family and community.

Each element matters. All five matter. Beyond them, of course, many other factors shape life, but not now. For the moment, it is enough to see how Devan has been trying to manage his family life, clinging to it like a boatman at the edge of a fast-flowing current, struggling to keep his balance.

Everyone must undertake their own journey through life. When Devan calculates his earnings–his daily wage–against the cost of basic necessities, it becomes painfully clear that even the first and most fundamental need–food–cannot be secured adequately. In other words, there are lives in which even the essential requirement for survival, food itself, remains out of reach. Such people live on whatever they can find, sustaining themselves somehow, day by day.

There is another truth embedded in this reality: people who live such lives often do not, and cannot, consider the quality or safety of the food they consume. Still, it is not true that change

never comes. As time moves forward, so does thought. Devan, too, has no interest in remaining stuck where he is. Why should he? The world is strangely constructed. Those who act as protectors are, in equal measure, also destroyers. And somewhere between these opposing forces, Devan continues to exist.

When he compared his daily income to the cost of feeding his family, he realised how impossible proper nourishment had become. The thought rose in his mind: there were four people in the household, and the cost of a balanced meal, where was the income to match that? Still, life had to continue within the limits of this fragile, swaying income. Time, after all, does not stop for anyone.

Balancing these realities, Devan weighed the city against the countryside and arrived at a firm conclusion: keeping his family in the village was the wiser choice. Over the course of his life–alongside his marriage and family responsibilities–he had built two solid, tiled-roof houses. Whether rain leaked through the roof or water lashed in through the windows was never the question. What mattered was this: just as one sets a time frame when constructing a brick-and-cement house, a mud-walled house with a tiled roof was also understood to last fifty years. Such houses he had built.

Alongside this, the greatest achievement of his life was that, from the day he began earning, he never allowed his parents to suffer in a way that would bring tears to their eyes. Even after their death, he performed their last rites in such a manner that people spoke of him with genuine respect.

Just as Devan had shaped his life through careful adjustment within his family, so too did those two houses–each able to stand for fifty years–remain before his eyes as symbols of stability. From them, a quiet contentment had taken root in his mind.

He never considered clothing a serious concern. Today, people may accumulate garments without limit, but Devan's family followed a different rhythm: when the dhoti was replaced, so too was the sari. Once a year, when he returned to the village, he bought all the clothes in Calcutta and brought them home. Those garments

lasted the entire year.

Medicines were an occasional matter. Sometimes they were needed; sometimes not.

When Devan looked closely at his own life and at the society of his village, he realised that while he was not well-off, he was certainly not badly off either. Even if he lived as a labourer, he lived by the strength of his own arms.

The satisfaction of living by the strength of his own arms awakened a deep contentment in Devan's mind. As this sense of fulfillment arose, a thought spoken by Banerji Dada five years earlier suddenly returned to him with force. The moment he recalled it, his face softened into a quiet smile. The reason lay before his eyes: he was watching his son, Kamesar, absorbed in his books, studying with steady concentration.

Five years ago, after observing Devan's life closely, Banerji Dada had spoken with care, stringing his thoughts together like a garland of flowers- "Devan, let the family remain in the village. This is Mithila. Coming and going will continue, relationships will remain intact. What happened in the previous generation has already happened. If it was good, let it stand as good; if it was bad, let it stand as bad, because it has turned into the past, into a ghost of its time. But keep a careful eye on the next generation."

As he spoke, Banerji Dada continued, and afterward, Devan realised how true it was, that life itself has a habit of dividing and redistributing. At times, it snatches away one's bread and turns it to dust; at other times, it consumes that same bread entirely while one is still eating.

Those words sank deep into Devan's heart and took firm root. For the past five years, he had been rethinking the direction of his family with renewed seriousness. Without ever voicing it aloud, Devan made a silent resolve before Banerji Dada–planting it deep within himself–that he would bring his son to Calcutta, educate him, and shape him into a learned, capable human being, someone who could stand upright within the family.

When a child's mother dies, a father may either abandon the child or embrace his paternal responsibility as a duty of the deepest kind. Devan resolved to understand his own responsibility in that same spirit, and to carry it through until he could shape his son into a new, time-worthy human being. This alone, he felt, was the true way to bind a family to the flow of time.

Every individual rises and falls according to the measure of their own destiny. Natural forces are so powerful that they can reduce the earnings of an entire lifetime to nothing in a single moment. One may spend a whole life in service to home and family, yet a flood may strike, or an earthquake may come, tearing everything apart. In such a world, what will the next generation's life be like? How will it be shaped?

Just as Krishna once drew the reins of the chariot's seven horses and brought his racing thoughts under control, Devan, too, gathered his wandering mind and focused it. He saw clearly that among the many kinds of educational institutions–centres of learning in every form–the sons of people like himself were already attending school. If that was the case, why couldn't he enroll his own son in an engineering college?

Not all arrangements begin and end with schools. Ultimately, everything depends on cost. And expenses, too, come in many forms. Some institutions demand heavy fees; others, ordinary schools, far less. Even if the water is muddy–like floodwater mixed with debris–it is still water, and water all the same.

On the day Devan was first moved by Banerji Dada's words, Kamesar had been too young, and the path ahead was filled with visible obstacles. Yet Devan's gaze, sharp as a vulture's, remained fixed on his son. What had once existed only in his thoughts, he fulfilled three years later. Fortune aligned–by chance or by design–and when the time was right, Devan brought Kamesar to Calcutta.

He decided that just as Mother Yashoda met Krishna morning and evening, always seeing him as her child, he too would visit his son each day, morning and evening, keeping close account of

everything. He would ask- “Son, what did you study today?” Not only that, he would also check whether the passbook was in order. It is the daily discipline of work that gradually gives shape to life.

Today, three full years have passed for Kamesar in Calcutta. Seeing his son progress within the limits of his own means and strength, Devan’s heart was filled with such joy that he decided to organise a feast to mark the completion of Kamesar’s third year. A feast not just for formality’s sake, but one to which all the schoolteachers and warehouse labourers would be invited. Though Banerji Dada held a position of responsibility, he always saw himself as a worker among workers.

Devan said to Banerji Dada- “Dada, Kamesar has absorbed the soil and water of Calcutta. My heart feels fulfilled seeing him this way. That is why I want to hold a celebratory feast.”

Moved by the surge of emotion in Devan’s voice, Banerji Dada’s own heart was stirred. Recognising himself in Devan, as both giver and receiver, he replied- “Whatever amount you decide to spend, everything should be done in keeping with that.”

Silently, Banerji Dada began to reflect. In bringing Kamesar to this point, to where he stood today, his own guidance and thinking had played a part. For that reason, he resolved to contribute half the expense himself, so that the joy rising in Devan’s heart might be doubled.

The celebration was a success. Kamesar moved on to another institution. Watching the care taken in his education, the teachers remained attentive, and Devan, no less so.

Time passed. Kamesar gradually emerged as a young engineer. Alongside him, thousands of other engineers were trained in Calcutta. All of them sought jobs, and soon the issue of government employment came to the forefront. In the end, a compromise was reached: each engineer would be provided with two tractors through a bank subsidy scheme.

Today, Kamesar stands at a threshold. On one side, his father had passed away six months earlier. On the other, his own marriage

had taken place just a month ago. His mother had died two years before that.

Remaining in close contact with Banerji Dada, Kamesar had already begun to turn his attention toward his ravaged and unsettled village and its fractured society. Gradually, a thought had taken root in his mind: the respect and recognition he had received in a city like Calcutta, as an engineering student, would not exist in the village. For one, there was no engineering work available. And more importantly, the village people did not fully understand what an engineer was. Beyond that, he had long remained distant from village life himself.

Until now, whenever he went to the village, he came and went like a guest, sitting briefly in his own courtyard, and once time passed, rising to take his leave and returning again to Calcutta.

Like the conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas in the Mahabharata, a struggle had begun within Kamesar, the tension between the village and the city, between departure and return. Yet his commitment to the village had awakened so strongly that every obstacle in his path was cleared away, like tender creepers sliced clean with a sickle. With the sharp blade of thought, he cut through his doubts.

All at once, a fresh surge of purpose rose within him. Just as his father, unable to sustain life in the village, had once come to Calcutta, he too, now an engineer, would return from Calcutta to the village. But he also understood this much: if he wished to build a life in any place, he would first have to learn how to create a suitable environment there.

Many questions, along with many possible answers, crowded his thoughts. Meanwhile, his wife Subhadra was inclined toward the city and the market. How could she not be? She had grown up in the household of a district-level officer. Still, resolve is a peculiar bond. It is not broken by others; it breaks only when a person breaks it themselves. And this resolve belonged to a young man freshly graduated from college.

As a final farewell to Calcutta, Kamesar went to Banerji Dada's home to seek his blessings.

Seven years earlier, Banerji Dada had retired from government service. With changes in pay scales over time, his pension had gradually increased to a point where he now received nearly the same amount each month as he had earned in the early years of his career. Inflation had risen, of course, so something had been lost. But when he was salaried, the burden of family responsibilities had been far heavier, and those obligations could not be avoided. Now those burdens were no longer present.

Both of his sons earned well enough. Not so much that they could provide money freely, but enough that his pension met his needs and left him independent of their support. That was why he often said, with quiet contentment,

"Son, build your life from your own earnings."

In today's circumstances, there is hardly anyone without need; it has become a somewhat troubling question. The economic environment has developed in such a way that everyone, rich and poor alike, lives with a constant shortage of money. Life's unnecessary demands have multiplied to the point that many people now belittle honest labour and instead embrace a culture of consumption. But this does not apply to Banerji Dada. From the very beginning, he shaped his life with such discipline that it never loosened, like a knotted sacred thread. As a result, there is no frantic rush in his morning and evening recitation of the Gayatri.

When Kamesar reached Banerji Dada's house, he learned that Dada had gone out at ten in the morning, and there was no clear word on where he might be. A life bound by routine has fixed places and fixed hours; an open, unrestrained life has neither clear shelter nor definite direction. Even so, a thought had already taken root in Kamesar's mind: since he was leaving Calcutta the next day, it would not be wise to expect a second visit. With the flurry of departure preparations, it was entirely possible that this farewell could be forgotten.

Meanwhile, Banerji Dada's wife heard that someone had come to meet him. As soon as she heard this, Subodhni came out of the inner room, approached Kamesar, and said- "Come, sit at the door. Who knows at what hour he might return."

Subodhni spoke calmly and without hesitation, because her heart had already delivered its verdict. Certainty may have its own time, but what time can uncertainty have? As the saying goes- "What address does the wanderer have?" He might return even now, or he might return after two hours. She spoke partly from estimation and partly while managing her husband's affairs.

There is, of course, a distance between the women of Mithila and those of Bengal. The reasons are many: the divide between city and countryside, between the literate and the illiterate, between affluence and deprivation, and between lives shaped by ease and lives forged in struggle. But that is not the matter at hand, at least not now.

As Kamesar sat at the doorstep, Subodhni's granddaughter came forward with betel leaves and water. Just then, Banerji Dada arrived. He was tired from the day's exertions, and it was clear in his mind that he would bathe first. Whatever came afterward could wait.

The moment he saw Banerji Dada, Kamesar spoke- "Dada, tomorrow I will leave Calcutta and go back to the village. Just as my father took the road to Calcutta in order to live, I too will now take the road back to the village. Once the path to living is found, one can live freely anywhere in the world."

In that instant, everything became clear to Banerji Dada through Kamesar's words. The greatest thought of all stood revealed, the desire for an independent life. Banerji Dada replied in a single sentence- "You carry my blessings with you, Kamesar." ❑

7.

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Kamesar hired two drivers from his village, Palarpur. He gathered all the belongings–the inherited possessions that had remained from his father's time–and, loading them onto the tractor with its trolley and plough, he took leave of Calcutta in much the same way that Yatri Ji had once departed from Mithila. Whether the departure was grand or modest no longer mattered; what mattered was that it was different now.

The next day, Kamesar reached Palarpur. Until then, no one in the village had owned a tractor, nor had anyone received an engineering education. In every respect, Kamesar felt like a newcomer to the place. Yet there remained a quiet certainty within him. This was the very soil on which he had been born, and five years of his life had been spent here.

Even so, in the rural setting–especially in the villages of Mithila–the use of tractors had already begun. Fields were being ploughed, soil turned over, and the work was steadily underway. Filled with enthusiasm, Kamesar decided to meet other tractor owners and learn from those who had already been getting work done with tractors. But as his thoughts raced ahead, he found himself caught in an inner conflict.

The dilemma was this: was it proper to go anywhere without first informing people? For that reason, Kamesar hesitated to visit anyone unannounced, feeling it would not be right to show up suddenly at someone's home. As the saying goes, one arrives

uninvited at a wedding chamber, and the bride's mother asks- "Why have you come here?" Yet such thoughts did not truly trouble him. He felt that going somewhere without purpose was one thing, but going somewhere for work was something else entirely. If one went with a purpose, then the work itself justified the visit.

The two village drivers left Kamesar's place after parking the vehicle and returned to their respective homes. Left alone, seated at the doorstep, Kamesar became trapped in a thicket of thoughts, like a person caught in a bamboo grove. Bamboo vines twist densely, and thorns grow among them too. That is why one does not bring bamboo from another grove; it is from that very thicket that bamboo is cut and fashioned into fences and pathways, into chairs and tables, even into the lathis carried by policemen. People say they are beaten with sticks in the police station, but what kind of stick it is, that is known only inside the station. The point is simple: if one never enters the bamboo thicket, how will one ever encounter bamboo? To put it plainly, life stands because of such tangles, and life moves forward through them as well.

After four hours, the two drivers, Raghuvir and Munesar, returned to Kamesar. Their return was only natural, for both had come to the village with thoughts of employment.

Everything in life was appearing new to Kamesar, as though he were seeing it for the first time. All five of his paternal families lived clustered together, bound by shared courtyards and thresholds. At once, another thought arose in his mind. Just as he had become an engineer through twenty years of disciplined effort and struggle, so too must the village be observed, how, and through what kind of long austerity, it might move forward like a high-speed engine.

News of Kamesar's vehicle spread throughout the village. The arrival of two tractors awakened a quiet but firm hope in the hearts of those whose work had long been stalled due to a lack of money. It rekindled the belief that society was still alive, because exchange and mutual dependence continued to exist among people. Work would come.

Kamesar himself felt no hesitation about going to someone's home without prior notice. But society does not function that way. Socially, people treat every doorstep as their own and openly discuss the actions and concerns of daily life. Five or seven men had already gathered at Kamesar's place. Having returned from a Bengali social environment, Kamesar was trying to observe courtesy. Yet until a disordered life becomes orderly, how can disordered thoughts and manners become disciplined? Until thought itself finds structure, observing propriety remains a distant goal, one that cannot be achieved through intention alone.

Raghuvir spoke up- "Kamesar bhai, just as our forefathers lived together as one in the village and carried on their lives, and just as all of us shaped ourselves in Calcutta, how will that same way of living take form here in the village? For that, the three of us must move forward with a single shared understanding. Only then will it be good for everyone."

Raghuvir had experience as a driver; Kamesar did not. Even so, Kamesar did not assume that just because Raghuvir had driven the vehicle from the warehouse to the village, he alone should continue to manage everything. After thinking carefully, Kamesar replied- "Just as the three of us are of the same age, and just as we have come from Calcutta to begin a new era in the village and to start new work, so too should the lives of all three of us move forward together. That is what each of us must also learn to sustain."

If an employer, a driver, and an owner are to move forward together, a bond of relationship must first be formed among them. And so, like a garland of flowers threaded together, Raghuvir and Munesar each clarified their place and role. Drawing on the same relational code that had governed Raghuvir's work as a driver in Calcutta, they offered their thoughts. All three men, rooted in the same soil and sustained by the same water, arrived through discussion at a shared principle.

Distilling his thoughts, Kamesar said- "This is a business. Mistakes will happen. But let us agree on one fundamental rule as

we move ahead. There will be no lies or deceit in our work. Let us commit ourselves to truth–truth in words, truth in transactions–and find honest ways to carry this forward together."

Kamesar's view resonated with both Raghuvir and Munesar. Their minds settled into agreement, convinced that if right action and right intent prevailed among the three of them, there would be no room for dispute in life. Smiling, Raghuvir said- "From today, let us bind ourselves into one thread and begin preparing for the future of our lives." ❑

8.

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After five years, Kamesar came to accept a simple truth: if the tools in one's own hands are kept in good order, managing life is not difficult. In other words, one can pull the cart of life without much strain.

Seeing that there was no shortage of food and that their income was comparable to a regular salary, Subhadra, too, experienced a quiet sense of contentment. She considered cooking her primary responsibility. She had hired a maid whose habits were shaped not by the circumstances of her parental home, but by a natural sense of domestic order. Because of this, Chanchaliya lived peacefully, avoiding conflict with her son and daughter-in-law.

Although her earnings alone could not sustain her entirely, Kamesar understood that if the maid's estimated monthly wage was deposited regularly in her name, then once a year–during their own travels–he could also arrange for her to go on a pilgrimage. This would at least allow it to be said that even after being left behind by her son and daughter-in-law, she had earned enough to bathe in the seven sacred rivers once a year in her old age. And along with this, it could also be said that money spent in the name of religion is never spent in vain.

Given Chanchaliya's naturally assertive temperament, the quarrel with her son and daughter-in-law brought about a shift in her outlook. The reason lay in the emotional distance between her own family and someone else's. While Kamesar couldn't fully

comprehend Chanchaliya's inner state, Subhadra understood it clearly. As a result, all household responsibilities–from caring for the children and washing clothes to collecting firewood–fell entirely on Chanchaliya's shoulders. This left her with neither rest nor the opportunity for her assertive nature to express itself. Subhadra, like a daughter to her, shared her burdens and helped ease the load.

Even so, a belief lingered in Chanchaliya's mind: when a daughter begins to earn and work, and later marries into another household, she becomes that family's asset. Therefore, as far as possible, parents should make minimal use of her labour. Yet another question arises: the time between a daughter's birth and her marriage is the very period during which she is shaped and prepared. Who teaches her the art of cooking, the mother or the father? In cases where a daughter is motherless, the father, too, must step in to teach her. The truth is, the web of familial obligations is such that when circumstances demand, fathers serve daughters as well, just as daughters, once married, continue to serve their parents.

Chanchaliya held a firm belief: when one eats another's food and drinks from their water, the least one can offer in return is a kind word. For this reason, she would often say to Subhadra- "Daughter-in-law, what else is there in life? Live it with comfort and joy, that alone is what human life should be."

Chanchaliya spoke from her own impulse, yet her words did not leave a deep impression on Subhadra. Still, it would be untrue to say they caused no stir at all. Even so, guided by the principle of wholehearted service, Subhadra would gently respond- "Grandmother, the greatest wrongdoing is to have children."

At the mention of "children," Chanchaliya's heart would tremble. Disturbed, she would reply- "Daughter-in-law, if people truly believed that, the world would come to a halt. What you see may seem like life going on, but its motion depends entirely on human beings. What sorrow do you have? God has given you a husband whose earnings double by day and quadruple by night. And I am here to care for your children. If even then one cannot live in

comfort and joy, what else is life for?"

Subhadra, smiling inwardly, quietly absorbed these words. From that point on, she treated Chanchaliya in such a way that, morning and evening, Chanchaliya would bless her son and daughter-in-law tenfold, and not utter a single curse.

By a turn of fortune, within five years, Subhadra gave birth to three children, all daughters. With every comfort available, the pain of childbirth weighed far less heavily on her than on women who endure it in deprivation.

At the birth of his daughters, not once did it occur to Kamesar–an educated young man in society–that he ought to challenge or reject the practice of marriage transactions centered around sons.

With a steady income in hand, Kamesar came to view the marriage of daughters as a routine household responsibility. In doing so, little room remained for reflection on a bitter truth: although we always claim to understand the teachings of the scriptures and the Puranas, when the moment of marriage arrives–along with the matter of gifts and dowry–we forget everything else.

In a society where fathers who once demanded dowries were openly condemned, those very men–previously rebuked–are now found standing by the roadside, heads bowed, counting bundles of cash. Such is today's society. Kamesar became so absorbed in his work–so completely immersed–that he lost sight not only of society but even of his own family.

Witnessing the widespread practice of dowry, Kamesar gradually came to accept it as a mechanism through which society sustains itself, a kind of social machinery. By this time, the income from his two tractors had increased to nearly double what it had once been. And through this rise in earnings, certain realities became clear to him.

First, without actively engaging with the work embedded in village life, how can society continue to function? Yet even as work sustains it, society remains society, filled with countless individual

problems, but also with paths toward their resolution.

Kamesar had the capacity to manage tractor-related work for eight hours a day. But as new opportunities emerged, he began pushing himself beyond that limit, working thirteen to fourteen hours daily.

A second reality also confronted him: financial transactions were not handled with the care of informed, experienced individuals. The villagers, simple and trusting, often placed blind faith in others. As a result, a portion of the income quietly slipped away at the hands of the drivers.

A third development also emerged: Kamesar's business dealings expanded to include all the tractor owners in the surrounding area. Through these interactions, relationships of mutual exchange were formed, giving rise to a new kind of collective within the village, a reshaped social network. This cooperation in transactions became a support system for both future gains and past earnings.

Near his home, Kamesar purchased one and a half kathas of land designated as residential property. In addition, he bought another katha of land at the village crossroads. A recurring thought occupied his mind: once a house was built, it could serve both as a residence and a base for business. He believed that income would continue to flow steadily, much like interest earned from a bank.

Whatever else may have been on his mind, one fact is clear: starting from the land near his home and extending through the village crossroads to the market three kos away, he purchased another one and a half kathas of homestead land. And even if the house was only thatched, by building it, Kamesar brought his family closer to a market-oriented lifestyle.

Within five years, just as Kamesar experienced economic growth, so too did Raghuvir and Munesar. More importantly, among the villagers as a whole, a renewed appreciation for labour itself began to awaken. ❑

9.

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After ten years, Kamesar's life appeared to have settled into a level plain, as though the upheavals had collapsed and flattened out. There was neither exaltation nor despair in him. An engine made of iron has a fixed lifespan; it must be used in such a way that, alongside family life, the life of one's capital also remains active and sustained. But Kamesar never truly turned his attention in that direction.

For five uninterrupted years, both tractors brought Kamesar abundant income, like a heavenly wish-fulfilling tree that gives endlessly, no matter what or how much one asks. Minor parts needed routine replacement, but when the engines themselves began to falter, like ailing bodies, the need for repairs, breakdowns, and replacements multiplied. As a result, most of the income, primarily in two ways–first due to reduced machine operation and second due to mounting repair costs–began to flow back into the tractors themselves.

Yet even then, Kamesar's resolve did not waver in the slightest. Around the same time, another development took place: the government of Bengal waived the bank loan he had taken for the tractors.

Despite the decline in income, an unmistakable economic strain, Kamesar made every effort to ensure that the image he had built for himself in society did not diminish. Even though his strength to sustain that image had weakened, he suppressed that

weakness within himself and continued to present an unchanged face to the world, much like a puppet dancing to hidden strings.

Gradually, shortages began to appear, in food and drink, in clothing, and in the daily management of family life. As a result, both he and his family began to seem, in the light of day, as if suddenly exposed beneath an open sky.

Subhadra, a graduate, understood both her husband's emotional turmoil and the pressure of financial strain. Yet, just as a husband does not speak freely before his wife and a wife before her husband, Subhadra also chose to remain silent, despite understanding everything. In her mind, the tree of contentment remained green. One must live while recognizing one's limits. When the husband is the provider of the household, interfering in his work or questioning it feels improper for a wife. Such things do happen at times, but rarely.

By now, irritability had taken firm root in Kamesar's mind. Village society has its own code of honour and reputation, which exists both as a form of balance and as a source of unity. And how could it be otherwise? Life is constantly caught in the movement between balance and unity, and between unity and balance.

In a neighbouring village to his own, Dularpur, which lies next to Palarpur, there lived a man named Duniyalal. In society, Duniyalal had a reputation of his own, one so strong that even habitual liars came to him to hear the truth and, once there, found themselves unable to speak anything but the truth. Even if his speech was of the sort that might call a tiger the niece of a cat, people still listened.

At the junction between the two villages, Dularpur and Palarpur, there stood a crossroads with ten shops. Those from Palarpur referred to it as Palarpur's square, while those from Dularpur claimed it as their own. By chance, after finishing his morning's work, Kamesar arrived at one of the tea stalls at this very junction, and Duniyalal happened to arrive there as well. Still simmering inside, Kamesar burst out the moment he reached the

stall- “There’s no sense left in the young men of Dularpur!”

Just as dissatisfaction begins to rise in the mind of a troubled person–questions like what will happen, where will it lead–similar thoughts had begun to stir in Kamesar’s mind. Like water flowing down a receding slope, the world of his days had gradually begun to descend.

Seated at the tea stall, Duniyalal, without saying a word, grabbed Kamesar by the collar and asked- “What do you mean, the young men of Dularpur have no sense?”

By temperament and upbringing, Kamesar had long held himself within the boundaries of civility, believing that a person in a civilized society must conduct himself with dignity. For some time, he had carried the thought that he was the first engineer among a backward people, that his formative years had been shaped in the soil and water of Calcutta. But gradually, these thoughts faded from his mind, replaced by a deeper understanding: he too was a man struggling for livelihood, just like everyone else around him.

As Duniyalal gripped him by the collar and demanded an explanation, Kamesar tried to free himself. But before he could, Duniyalal struck him sharply across the face and said- “You’ve received an engineering education, and that’s fine. But every human being must also develop an understanding of what society is, how it is formed, and how it moves forward. Until that understanding comes, society will keep stumbling, won’t it? And even now, the way you interpret an individual’s action as a social flaw shows that your understanding lacks depth.”

The slap across his face jolted Kamesar awake. He now felt his own shortcomings clearly, yet the sting of being struck in front of others lingered sharply in his mind. He protested- “In every village, respectable people are humiliated at crossroads and public squares.”

Duniyalal replied- “So should such matters be taken to court? Or should they be resolved by gathering ten people from the community and settling them within society itself?”

Hearing Duniyalal's words, Kamesar hesitated. Until that moment, he had not truly understood who Duniyalal was. But that day, he did. Duniyalal then added- "This is society. Everyone has to live together here."

On hearing that everyone must live together in society, Kamesar fell silent. He finished his tea and returned to his work.

Meanwhile, Duniyalal felt a need to understand why Kamesar had spoken the way he did. And as often happens in village society, when two people exchange sharp words, both inevitably turn toward the larger body of the community, which then charts its own course of response.

Ram Lal also arrived at the tea stall to share his views. Seeing him, Duniyalal said- "Ram Lal bhai, may you live long."

Just as a character in a story appears again and again in the reader's mind–though repetition alone does not increase their stature–so it was that Duniyalal spoke on seeing Ram Lal.

Pouring out his troubled thoughts, Ram Lal said- "Duniya, whatever your reputation may be in other villages, in Dularpur we consider you our foremost man. This is a matter of the village, and you are the one who understands everything here."

Ram Lal did not know that Duniyalal had already struck Kamesar across the face.

At that very moment, hearing Ram Lal speak in this manner, Kisun Lal burst out- "Ram Lal bhai, you too are quite mystical, like Ram himself. In one place you become Brahma, in another a forest-dweller. Somewhere you wander like Ram, searching for Sita among trees and vines, and elsewhere you turn into Ram Lalla himself. Speak plainly, what exactly has happened with Kamesar?"

Hearing the pain in his words, Ram Lal felt the way people often do when someone tries to grasp the depth of their suffering but cannot quite touch it. Smiling faintly, he said- "Kisun does tractor work. I had given him half the amount in advance. When the work was completed and we sat down to settle the accounts, he completely ignored the advance payment."

Hearing Ram Lal's account, Duniyalal felt it was best to bring the matter to a quiet close rather than let it escalate further. If one were to start counting such incidents, it would seem that the fourteen thousand wars said to have been fought across the world were nothing, every village has its own history of conflicts, far more than fourteen thousand. Let it be.

Setting the matter aside, Kisun Lal said- "Brother, leave this now. It is time for work. Let each of us go and attend to our own world."

When Kamesar returned home for the midday meal, Subhadra spoke while serving food- "The Don Bosco people have warned us about all three children. They said that if the fees are not deposited by the day after tomorrow, the children will be expelled from school."

Like a sudden squall that sets the ears ringing, the words struck Kamesar's mind with a sharp clang. What shook him was this: he himself had studied at that college in Calcutta where figures like Subhas Babu and Bidhan Chandra Roy, the jewels of Bengal, had once studied. His wife too had graduated from T.N.B. College in Bhagalpur. And now their children were being threatened with expulsion from a school like Don Bosco.

Kamesar's heart began to break.

And in that breaking, he found himself finally ready to accept the words Banerji Dada had spoken on the day he gained admission to engineering college- "Kamesar, firm resolve requires a firm path. If that path is not secured, the resolve itself remains trapped in uncertainty." ❑

10.

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Judging by the measure commonly used for an ordinary human lifespan–roughly a hundred years–Kamesar had already crossed the halfway point. He had reached midlife.

There was once a time in schools when a class would change only once a year, with a single midterm examination after six months. Now, examinations take place every three months, at three, six, nine, and twelve months. In much the same way, having passed the midpoint of his life, Kamesar had begun to conduct an inner examination of himself.

And how could he not? He was no religious zealot, but as a working man, a labouring being, he could not remain blind to conduct and consequence.

Within the family, Kamesar saw clearly that among his six children there was one youngest son and five daughters older than him. Of the five daughters, the marriages of the three eldest had already been arranged, by selling the three plots of land he had once purchased. Two daughters still remained unmarried. From where would their marriages be arranged now? On top of that, the cost of marrying daughters was rising day by day.

Just as the sight of a tangled forest on an unfamiliar road causes one's heart to hesitate, the road ahead had begun to appear frightening to Kamesar.Alongside this, another reckoning rose sharply in Kamesar's mind: somehow, by hook or by crook, he had

managed to teach his two younger daughters little more than how to write their names and the names of their villages. Was that all?

He himself had had a father who, all his life, lifted sacks in a warehouse, sweat pouring from his body, yet still managed to educate his son up to a respectable level. Had Kamesar been able to do even that much for his own children?

He had not yet managed to build a single proper house. And to make matters worse, the family had now grown larger than before.

Astonished and unsettled, Kamesar stood, inwardly examining his life as if it were an answer sheet laid bare before him. At that moment, Subhadra came close and asked-

"Why are you losing heart? Even a single seed carries seventy-two hopes within it. Try, even now, to understand life clearly. From the moment a person begins to truly see life for what it is, paths of brightness begin to light up within it."

Hearing her words, it was as though Kamesar's mind suddenly awakened. The trust he had long held in her deepened even further, and with it grew his appreciation for her way of thinking. Like a man at a loss, he looked at Subhadra and said- "I cannot understand what would be the right thing to do now."

Listening to her husband, Subhadra spoke with a renewed clarity in her voice- "At the very beginning, when I said that the government had given you two tractors and that you should sell them and take up a job, what did you say then?"

Her words struck Kamesar like someone lifting another person and pinning him down, sitting on his chest and demanding an answer. He felt wounded to the core. Thoughts began to race through his mind: an independent life, an independent enterprise. But when it came to the art of living independently, he had made serious mistakes. If that were not so, how could Banerji Dada have lived so vigorously into his eighties, never dependent on anyone else? From the beginning of his salaried life and its discipline to the very end of his days, he had carried life forward in the same steady

manner.

Drawing a curtain over the past, Kamesar said quietly-

“What should be done now?”

By a turn of fate, work had begun on National Highway 57, and with it came a demand for engineers. It was a private company’s project, with no age bar. What was needed was an engineer capable of doing the work. Just as Kamesar understood this, so did Subhadra. Offering her thought, she said-

“Work has begun on NH-57. They need engineers. Get yourself appointed there.”

Hearing his wife’s words, Kamesar found himself standing at a crossroads. On one side, the idea of an independent life was being quietly laid to rest. On the other, economic hardship stood ready to take life itself hostage.

Just as life is dear to everyone, so it was dear to Kamesar as well. Yet life is what it is: some people live it through ideas, while others understand it simply as the protection of the body.

Had Kamesar’s life broken all at once, perhaps some living blood of thought might still have remained within him. But now, after breaking slowly over the course of twenty years, it had shattered so completely that even the blood of thought had either turned into colourless water or dried up like a pool in the desert.

Standing at the turning point of a defeated life and collapsing ideals, Kamesar said- “Tomorrow itself, I will go and join.”

Hearing her husband’s decision, scenes from Subhadra’s parental home began to dance again in her mind. She said nothing, but her heart grew quietly sweet. ❑

11.

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Kamesar had now reached the age of seventy. There was no government service to fall back on, no retirement accompanied by a pension. As much salary as there was, that much duty still had to be done.

After working continuously for twelve hours, Kamesar returned to his lodging. His body was crushed with exhaustion, and just as his body had been ground down, so too had his mind been worn raw by the weight of work. In the family, there were only two people now: himself and his wife. All five daughters lived in their respective marital homes, and his son, Gulab–who had never been able to secure a stable life–lived in Delhi.

By a "stable life," one means this: when Gulab reached school-going age, Kamesar's financial condition had already begun to decline. Even so, on the occasion of his son's birth, he had arranged a proper feast. Those who attended had blessed the child, placing their hands on his head and saying- "Son, you will surpass your father. You will become a great officer, a great engineer." But like words shaped of air, those blessings dissolved into the air itself and became part of the atmosphere.

Because Gulab was the only son, both parents carried a deep and earnest desire to give him a good upbringing and education. But the economic current of life had already run dry for Kamesar, and with it, the current of thought had also begun to fade. He reached a point where, despite a heart full of devotion toward his son, he

could do nothing.

As soon as he reached the lodging, Kamesar saw that his wife was writhing in pain. There was no one to look after her, no one who had called a doctor. Crushed by exhaustion, with his own body failing, tears began to stream from both eyes as he slipped into a state close to fainting. His inner voice began to speak: at which turn of life, on which path, had he gone astray? And which path had he taken? He still could not understand.

Then another thought arose within him: for more than fifty years, life had been guided by his own ideas. But later, it had come to be shaped by his wife's thinking, and she, too, was a graduate.

From the mouth of defeated and exhausted Kamesar, the words slipped out without effort- "This is life. Should one live it crying, or live it laughing?"

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